

Light rail: There will never be a better time

BY DAVE EARLING
Special to The Times

Richard Harkness got one thing right in a guest column (The Times, Dec. 22): Light rail will not ease traffic congestion.

Yes, that's a fact. But it's not the issue. Freeway and arterial congestion is going to be a fact of life in the central Puget Sound region for years. Our major roads are gridlocked. There simply isn't enough road space to accommodate everyone. Gridlock means that even if mass transit removes some cars from the roads, other cars will replace them.

This region needs to invest more than \$65 billion in transportation improvements and maintenance over the next 20 years just to keep pace with population and economic growth.

Unfortunately, congestion is here to stay. The issue is whether we're going to provide people with alternatives to traveling in cars and buses on congested roads.

Light rail is one alternative. Light rail basically creates a new roadway through the most congested region of the state. The best use of that new road is light rail because it can move large numbers of people efficiently and reliably regardless of traffic or weather. And light rail can be expanded, to the Eastside, Everett and Tacoma, as the region grows over the next 20 to 100 years.

This region has debated rail transit for over 30 years. Nothing in Harkness' col-

umn is new and much of it is inaccurate and outdated. He attacks light rail, for example, based on information in a study done more than a decade ago by an agency, the federal Urban Mass Transit Administration, that was abolished years ago.

Seattle is the last major metropolitan region on the West Coast, and one of the last in the country, to start building a rail transit system. Even Portland has a successful, and growing, light rail system. Every study done of Seattle's transportation challenges over the past 20 years has looked favorably on light rail as being part of the solution.

The people I talk with every day are tired of inaction. They want leadership from their elected officials. They don't want more studies and they don't want delays. They want to see solutions being built.

Our region's citizens voted overwhelmingly to tax themselves four years ago to build a light rail system. They deserve our best efforts to build a system as promised.

Light rail is the only ready-to-go transportation alternative on the table today. There is a plan, voter approval and financing. And the federal government is willing to contribute hundreds of millions of dollars toward construction.

The federal commitment, which may mean more than \$1 billion over time, is available now. It may not be in six months or a year from now.

Given the \$65 billion transportation need, we do need to look at alternatives. No single transportation initiative, including light rail, will solve the problem. We need more road construction, more buses, more HOV lanes, more vanpools, and more rail. And we need transportation and land-use policies that make it attractive — and possible — for people of all income levels to live in urban areas.

It takes years to get a transportation initiative to this point. Even the "free bus" idea — which I believe merits careful consideration by all of the region's transit agencies — is years away from being a reality.

It's taken more than 10 years to get light rail to this point.

The easy thing for this region's leaders to do would be to do nothing. Making a decision, taking action, takes courage and leadership. One of the reasons this region has a transportation mess is the failure of the region's leaders — in both the public and private sectors — to put the region's long-term needs first. Failure is not an option for this generation of leaders.

Now is the time for light rail. There will never be a better time to start than the present. There will never be a time when there will be less disruption during construction. And there will never be a time when costs are lower.

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