

LETTERS

New rail systems not answer for Puget Sound

If there is going to be a Sept. 20 vote on regional rail transit, I trust that the *Puget Sound Business Journal* will provide comprehensive, unbiased coverage of the costs and benefits of rail mass transit, as shown by experience in other cities.

For example, just to the south of us, in Portland, the initiation of light rail transit (MAX) is not reversing a long-term decline in the percentage of metropolitan area workers who use transit to get to work. Weekly ridership on MAX has declined in its second year. Overall costs per passenger ride on the Portland transit system are going up.

For example, just to the north, in Vancouver, British Columbia, post-EXPO daily ridership on SkyTrain has come in at 30 percent below projections. Again, transit system costs per ride are going up.

And, for example, a 1986 Puget Sound Council of Governments study of transit options for our area reached the conclusion that light rail "will not solve projected general traffic congestion in major corridors or on local arterials."

These disappointing findings are consistent with the experience of new rail systems throughout North America, from San Diego to Buffalo, from Edmonton to Miami. Ridership is lower than expected, and costs are higher. A relatively few people get a nice ride, but all citizens pay for it. And congestion is not cured, especially in the suburbs, where most of the growth is occurring.

There is plenty of evidence available to help King County voters to reach a conclusion about what rail transit can and cannot do for our region, but the facts are not often published around here.

Instead, the media fosters the assumption, which is a false hope, that \$4 billion or more spent on a region-wide rail system would "fix" congestion.

What are the alternatives? First, we can be much more aggressive in employing relatively inexpensive marketing and scheduling know-how to get more passenger miles out of the empty seats on buses, vans, taxis, and autos we already use.

Let's get as serious in this community about filling our vehicles as Cal Worthington and Joe Isuzu are about putting them on the road.

Second, local governments should accelerate efforts to apply technologies which can achieve more vehicle capacity on the roads we already have (and the roads we will build, trains or no trains).

Such technologies include better traffic information systems, as proposed last year on the PSBJ editorial page, and computer-assisted traffic flow management.

Third, let's engage in some creative problem-solving about how to cut down just a little bit on the number of vehicle trips we take.

One approach — with thousands of specific applications — is more use of electronic communication to move information around the region, instead of people. One specific application is the widespread availability of automatic teller machines, in effect moving the services of banks to where we shop, instead of us having to drive to the banks.

Companies like US West, Boeing Computer Services, Microsoft, and/or their future competitors can help our region to develop and deploy the network capabilities we need to avoid transportation gridlock in the 21st century.

Seattle is too often viewed by the local media as being behind the times in not already having a rail mass transit system. A more reasonable view is that the Seattle region had a citizenry far-seeing enough in the Forward Thrust era to vote down rail transit long before it became clear that was the correct decision.

Now, on the brink of a new decade,

with a new century close behind, our fiscally cautious, environmentally sensitive, high-tech conscious region is ideally positioned to create a unique future.

We can skip over the obsolete technology of fixed-route, fixed-schedule, heavily-subsidized rail transit. We can instead develop the right mix of more appropriate technology for our times, accomplish the quality of life we want, and avoid spending hundreds of millions of dollars.

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