

CATHERINE KANNER / OPART

The system is warped; put light rail on hold

BY RICHARD HARKNESS
Special to The Times

LIGHT rail won't ease traffic congestion, so why build it?

Now that disturbing truths about Sound Transit cost overruns have been exposed, it's time voters knew Sound Transit's other important secret: Sound Transit's \$2.6 billion light rail system won't even make a dent in Puget Sound's traffic congestion problem.

The proof can be found hidden deep within Sound Transit's own Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), a document required by federal law. It all boils down to a few numbers. Without light rail, total daily traffic on area roads and freeways is forecast to be 68,239,618 vehicle miles of travel (VMT) in 2010. With light rail it would drop to 68,069,618. This is only a difference of one fourth of one percent. It's equivalent to removing one car of every 400. These figures, along with year 2000 values, are accurately plotted in the accompanying chart. These VMT figures are the best available measure of rail's ability or inability to help solve the region's vexing traffic congestion problem. The case against rail could be rested on these numbers alone.

Even where rail should have its greatest impact, the numbers are disappointing. For instance, the number of peak hour vehicles crossing the ship canal in 2010 would only decline from 45,789 to about 45,740. The number of peak period auto trips leaving downtown Seattle would only drop from 30,800 to 30,100. Both are incredibly small impacts.

Some argue the current proposal is only for a starter system intended to grow and eventually produce more meaningful results. Here again the data show otherwise. The 1993 EIS prepared for a \$12 billion-plus, 125-mile light rail system shows it would only reduce traffic volumes 1.9 percent more than a bus solution costing a fraction as much.

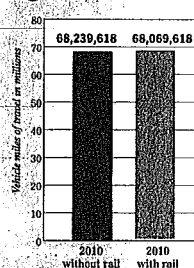
At the ship canal

Another misleading claim is that light rail can replace 12 lanes of freeway, but this is a theory assuming fully packed trains. The reality (based on close analysis of actual projected rail ridership and freeway statistics) is that a single light rail track won't even move as many people in 2010 as a single lane on I-5 does today. Measured at the ship canal (where rail looks best) the respective volumes are 20,000 persons daily for a rail track versus 29,300 for a freeway lane. Averaged along the entire route, rail will carry less than half what a corresponding lane pair on I-5 now carries.

Sometimes, when pressed, officials that know admit light rail won't help traffic congestion but retort that light rail offers an alternative. Of course that's true, but only for a small percentage of the population who live, work and shop along the proposed route. A 21-mile rail line can't serve anywhere near the number of trip origins and destinations reached by our 15,000 miles of roads and freeways. In fact, only two-hundredths of one percent of the urbanized area would be within walking distance (one-quarter mile) of a light rail station. So virtually everyone will need to drive or take a bus to reach a rail station.

How cost effective is rail in offering this alternative? The EIS claims peak pe-

Regional traffic



Source: Sound Transit's light rail EIS

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road vehicle miles traveled would be reduced from 15,898,000 to 15,858,000 for a net reduction of 40,000. Since the average work trip length is about 10 miles, this amounts to removing about 4,000 cars from the compute.

If we assume the main reason for building rail is to reduce congestion during peak commute periods, it is reasonable to divide the project's cost of \$2.6 billion by 4,000. This yields the astonishing conclusion that it will cost \$650,000 for every car taken off the roads during rush hours.

Perhaps Puget Sound voters are generous enough to spend this amount so a relative few can bypass the congestion everyone else is stuck in. However, that's not the way the question was framed when we voted in 1996. If light rail goes ahead for this reason, to paraphrase Winston Churchill, never will so many have paid so much to benefit so few.

To summarize: light rail won't reduce congestion below today's levels, it won't keep congestion from getting worse, and it won't even keep future congestion at noticeably lower levels than if we simply spent the \$2.6 billion building a pyramid.

Similar conclusions can be drawn in respect to light rail's impact on air quality, energy use, and urban sprawl. Since rail does not measurably reduce vehicle miles of travel, it can't help much with these other important objectives either. In fact, the EIS Energy Backup Technical Report shows that such a huge amount of energy is needed to construct the system, it would take 75 years (at 2010 ridership levels) just to break even.

It's too bad. Everyone would like a silver bullet for our congestion, air quality, energy and urban sprawl problems.

Rail vs. real

Unfortunately, there's a huge difference between rail's theoretical capabilities and its actual performance in real cities. To make matters worse, all the above figures taken from Sound Transit's EIS may be overly optimistic. A landmark Urban Mass Transit Administration study found that light rail systems seldom achieve even half the predicted ridership. All this is, of course, disappointing news. And for many it probably comes as a surprise, given that light rail is frequently promoted as a solution to the

traffic mess. Logically one would expect that the largest impending public works project in Seattle history, namely light rail, would be targeted at solving the region's largest problem, namely traffic congestion. Apparently not. We are being rushed into spending well over \$2 billion on a non-solution. The very fact that light rail proponents are in such a hurry to lock things down should be warning to us all.

With fewer stations, higher costs and illusory benefits, has Sound Transit promised a Lexus, planning to deliver a Yugo while billing for a Rolls?

How has something with such deep pointing prospects gotten so far? That's a story in itself. The PR campaign to sell rail before the 1996 election was impressive, effective and one-sided. The image of sleek trains and expected environmental benefits was never balanced with hard facts about cost-effectiveness.

How could it be otherwise? Millions of dollars have been spent promoting rail. Yet no funding exists for concerned citizen groups to publish opposing views. As a result, light rail is a house of cards sustained by myth.

Stone upon stone

Few probably know how rail backers pile one stone on another in order to drive the region inexorably into a massive rail program. The latest draft of the Metropolitan Transportation Plan (MTP), produced by the Puget Sound Regional Council, is a good example. The MTP calls for a massive increase in public spending for transportation, \$98 billion over the next 30 years. Over \$13 billion is targeted for 125 miles of light rail.

Should the MTP be adopted, Sound Transit can claim they are just supporting an already adopted regional strategy. And thus another stone is placed. Had PSRC applied a strict cost benefit analysis to individual elements of the MTP, it is doubtful light rail could have earned its way into the plan. State law now requires such cost benefit analysis, or "least cost planning" be used, but so far the PSRC has failed to comply.

Wasting \$2 billion-plus on a non-solution is bad enough, but even worse is the strategic implication of our current preoccupation with light rail. Suppose the political leadership spends the next few years claiming they are "doing something" about our traffic problem, when in reality they chase a non-solution. We'll have let them off the hook. We'll all wake up in 10 years realizing rail's no answer, and congestion's far worse. Voters should insist on two remedies before it's too late.

First, light rail should be put firmly on hold until it has been thoroughly and objectively evaluated, against a full range of alternatives, in terms of its cost effectiveness in solving our most pressing transportation problem, namely traffic congestion. Then, after the public has digested the results and heard equally from all sides, a regional vote of confidence should be held on Sound Transit's light rail project. Until that happens, we are being led down the yellow brick road.

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A S A M LETTER

TEEN SM

Kids will non-sm adults

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