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Vote to give yourself a voice on light rail

Jeff Judson, For the Express-News : April 19, 2015

In the upcoming San Antonio city elections, voters should give themselves the right to vote on any future light rail project by voting “yes” on the city charter amendment.

When Mayor [Ivy Taylor](#) pulled the city’s funding for the streetcar last summer, County Judge [Nelson Wolff](#) said at the time, “VIA has done a horrible job of articulating why they’re doing streetcar. It’s been a tremendous failure on their part to explain it.” But without a vote before rail is built, there is little incentive for any public agency to provide adequate public information.

Indeed, VIA has gone to great lengths to avoid a public vote on rail. VIA obviously had the streetcar in mind when in 2011 its cadre of paid lobbyists asked the [Texas Legislature](#) to pass a bill allowing VIA to issue bonds without going to the voters, as the law would otherwise have required. The charter amendment will simply reverse this ill-advised legislation.

There are many other reasons to vote “yes” on the amendment. Costing on average \$198 million per mile to build, according to [Federal Transit Administration](#) data, any light rail system in San Antonio will cost billions for debt and operating subsidies for our children and grandchildren to pay off. Rail routes should be chosen with public approval lest they serve a few well-connected developers. Light rail will negatively impact local businesses since it requires tearing up city streets for years at a time to relocate all public utilities — water, gas, electricity, telecommunications — from under the rail line. It is unthinkable that such a large investment with all its implications would not be scrutinized and approved by voters.

Voter approval will also encourage VIA and local politicians to invest in projects that move the most people rather than just getting the most federal dollars. Because of bad incentives in the federal funding process, there is currently a race in the U.S to build the most expensive light rail project, with Seattle in the lead at \$628 million per mile. But the most expensive project won’t move the most people. Politicians like big price tags for public works projects, which is why the average cost for building light rail has increased from \$17 million/mile in 1981 to \$198 million/mile today (both expressed in 2015 dollars). Only voters can put a stop to this runaway spending.

Bus-based systems outperform rail in every category, carrying more people at less cost with more frequent service. VIA’s Primo bus service is a prime example of a clean, modern, rapid system that will attract any potential rail rider. But building a world class Primo system fails in one category — it doesn’t pull down as many federal dollars as rail.

According to an upcoming [CATO Institute](#) study, if federal funds were distributed according to ridership, where VIA performs admirably — rather than funding construction projects — San Antonio would have received an extra \$267 million from 1991 through 2013.

If VIA and local politicians want to actually increase transit ridership and market share, reduce congestion, and improve the environment, they would build transit projects that attract the most riders, not just ones that cost the most money. Las Vegas, Nevada, is the only city in the U.S. to substantially increase transit market share because it expanded its bus system rather than build a rail system. Between 1991 and 2012, total transit ridership there has grown by six times, and per capita ridership has nearly quadrupled. Transit's share of rush hour commuting there has more than doubled, while in Dallas, which built rail, it fell by 50 percent. Although Dallas has been aggressively building rail over the past 10 years as its population has increased significantly, its total transit ridership is the same as it was 10 years ago.

Voters should approve the upcoming city charter amendment giving themselves the right to vote on future rail projects. Then let's work together to make rational transportation decisions for our city. (see <http://sachartervote.com/street-car-vote/>)

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