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Has RTD's FasTracks been worth it? No

By: Randal O'Toole and Brian T. Schwartz – April 28, 2013

With great fanfare, RTD opened its West Rail Line for business on Friday. This light-rail line was a boondoggle when it was first planned in 1997. It's even worse today.

Last year, RTD expected the project to cost $709 million. Surely officials will brag about being "under budget," as the final actual cost was $707 million. But in 1997, RTD estimated a total cost of just $250 million, or about $350 million in today's dollars. So the line actually cost more than twice the original projections.

Moreover, RTD's predictions of how many riders the West Rail Line will carry — and therefore how much congestion it will relieve — have greatly declined. In 2003, RTD predicted 29,100 west line riders per weekday in its first year of operation. Now, it predicts just 19,300. If the train carries 19,400 riders, RTD will likely claim it exceeded expectations when it actually fell one-third short.

Even that level of ridership will be achieved because RTD is canceling six express bus routes, herding riders to the slower and more expensive train. Daily commute times for some riders will increase by 40 minutes or more, RTD board member Natalie Menten told us. "I am getting a ton of calls and e-mails complaining about elimination or reduction. One person alone sent me a scanned petition with about 50 rider signatures from just one route," Menten said. Many riders "stated they'll just drive instead of enduring the extra hours they face away from home or family."

Back in 1997, RTD compared light rail with bus rapid transit (BRT) on high-occupancy vehicle lanes on U.S. Highway 6. It found the bus was 88 percent as effective at reducing congestion, and for half the cost. Notably, the only BRT line that RTD included in its 2004 FasTracks plan has had the smallest cost escalations of any FasTracks route. That means that, for about the same price as RTD thought the West Rail Line would cost, it could have added BRT on both U.S. 6 and Interstate 70, relieving almost twice as much congestion for twice as many people. BRT was much more cost-effective than rail, yet RTD chose the more expensive alternative.

With double the construction costs and only two-thirds of the riders, the West Rail Line is clearly far less cost effective at relieving congestion than originally claimed. In fact, it may not relieve congestion at all. The boondoggle of 1997 has turned into the travesty of 2013.

Every transit agency that builds new rail lines eventually hits a financial wall that forces service cuts, thereby harming the transit riders it is supposed to serve. Atlanta hit the wall in 1985. Since then, the region's population has nearly tripled, but transit ridership has fallen 16 percent.

San Jose hit the wall in 2001, cutting service by 25 percent and losing more than a quarter of its riders. Portland's transit district experienced the same effect last year, cutting service by 12 percent and predicting further cuts of as much as 70 percent will be needed to meet its financial obligations.

There are different reasons for hitting the wall, but one cause is that rail lines must be expensively rebuilt about every 30 years. A recent example is the Metrorail system in Washington, D.C. Lacking funds to maintain the system, its rail lines have steadily deteriorated, leading to a 2009 crash that killed nine people. In 2010, Federal Transit Administration head Peter Rogoff chastised transit agencies for planning new rail lines when they couldn't maintain current ones.

RTD will hit its financial wall sometime in the next 10 or 12 years. When it does, the West line and other rail lines will be an even greater cost burden than they are today. Taxpayers, transit riders, and motorists will all rue the day that RTD built its first light-rail line.