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O'Toole: Buses are a better bet than rail for Austin

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By Randal O'Toole

The city of Austin and Capital Metro are once again planning a light-rail line, "Project Connect," which will cost more than \$1 billion to connect East Riverside Drive and Grove Street with downtown and then north to Highland Mall. Advocates say light rail can carry more people than buses, but they are wrong: Buses can carry far more people, faster, more safely, and for far less money than building a new rail line.

Project Connect revealed its bias in favor of rail in its calculation of bus capacities, which assumed an exclusive bus lane could handle just one bus every three minutes. Why so few? Observations by Portland State University have found that a single bus stop can serve more than 40 buses per hour, and cities can stagger bus stops, with four stops every two blocks, allowing one bus every 22 seconds.

If that isn't enough, bus capacities can be increased further with double-decker buses now being used in Las Vegas, Seattle and other cities. These buses have more seats than a light-rail car and can move 18,000 people per hour, far more than any light-rail line.

Capacity isn't really the issue, however, as Project Connect planners estimate that only about 16,000 to 20,000 people per day would ride the light rail, with no more than 2,500 per hour during rush hour. The real issue is cost. Why should taxpayers spend more than \$1 billion to move fewer than a third of a percent of the region's more than 6 million person-trips per day?

Buses can share city streets with other vehicles, keeping infrastructure costs low, and can go to many different destinations so fewer people need to transfer from one vehicle to another.

By comparison, light rail is expensive to build, expensive to expand and expensive to maintain, while the rail cars only go where tracks go.

Project Connect estimates light rail will cost close to \$150 million per mile. In contrast, the MoPac Express Lanes now under construction, which will give Capital Metro buses an uncongested alternative 24 hours a day, are costing less than \$20 million per mile, part of which will be covered by tolls paid by drivers of low-occupancy vehicles. The MoPac lanes are expected to move 50,000 vehicles per day.

Many people imagine light rail is rapid transit. In fact, planners estimate the trains will average only about 22 miles per hour, and this is probably high.

Other light-rail lines that stop every half mile, as Project Connect plans, average less than 18 miles per hour. Buses on express lanes can go 60 miles per hour.

The willingness of many people to support expensive light-rail lines when buses can carry more people for less money shows they really don't care about transportation. For the city of Austin and Capital Metro, a major reason to push light rail is to get "free" federal dollars.

A federal grant program called New Starts promises to cover at least half the cost of new rail lines, and cities that choose the most expensive technologies get the most dollars. Of course, local taxpayers have to cover the other half of the construction cost, plus most maintenance costs, which are many times higher than for buses.

Light rail is a waste of money and a poor choice for any transit corridor. Project Connect should use available funds to improve transportation for everyone, not the relative handful of people who will ride light rail.

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