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Race to waste money on streetcars

Randal O'Toole
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The increasingly expensive streetcar line proposed for San Antonio would be a disaster for transit riders, taxpayers and motorists in the region. Building a streetcar line costs up to 50 times as much as starting a bus route, streetcars cost twice as much to operate as buses, and they can't carry as many people per hour as buses.

Contrary to claims that streetcars are “high-capacity transit,” the modern streetcars used in Portland and other cities have only 30 seats. Since tracks can safely handle no more than about 20 streetcars per hour, a streetcar line can move only about 2,000 people per hour.

By comparison, a single bus stop can serve more than 40 buses per hour, and by staggering bus stops, a city street can serve more than 160 per hour. Standard buses have about 40 seats and room for 20 people standing, making it possible to move more than 10,000 people per hour. If that's not enough, double-decker buses can move 18,000 people per hour.

Laying streetcar tracks is enormously expensive, costing an average of around \$30 million per rail mile, while the vehicles themselves cost about \$4 million each. Buses share the cost of streets with cars and trucks, and the buses themselves cost only about \$400,000 (\$700,000 for double-decker buses).

Immediately after it is built, rail maintenance costs are low. But they rapidly grow as infrastructure ages. American rail transit systems have a \$60 billion maintenance backlog that is growing because agencies don't have enough money to keep systems in shape.

When operating at capacity, more than half of streetcar riders have to stand clinging to straphangers, while up to 80 percent of bus riders get to sit comfortably. New buses can come with power ports at each seat, on-board WiFi, and other amenities to attract riders.

Moreover, buses can go anywhere streets go, which means once they leave city centers, they can fan out to many neighborhoods. Streetcars go only where rails go, forcing most riders to switch to car or bus to get to their actual destinations.

For every billion passenger miles, light-rail lines are involved in three times as many fatalities as buses. We don't have enough data to know whether streetcars are as dangerous as light rail, but

two out of three Portland cyclists report that they've suffered accidents caused by getting their wheels caught in streetcar tracks.

While streetcars are powered by electricity, most electricity in America comes from burning fossil fuels, so it isn't particularly green. Light-rail lines in Baltimore, Buffalo, Cleveland, Dallas, Norfolk, Pittsburgh and Salt Lake City use more energy and emit more greenhouse gases, per passenger mile, than the average SUV.

Streetcars also increase urban congestion as the few cars they take off the road are more than made up for by the road space occupied by the streetcars. A streetcar project in California was estimated to take fewer than 300 cars per hour off the streets, but would reduce the streets' capacity to move cars by 1,100 cars per hour.

Proponents claim streetcars contribute to economic development. In fact, Portland and other streetcar cities have to subsidize development along streetcar and light-rail routes. These subsidies typically come from property taxes that otherwise would have gone to schools, libraries, fire departments and other services.

Given all these problems, why do so many cities want to build streetcars? The answer is federal grant funds that promise to cover at least half the costs of new transit lines. And cities that spend more get more. Thus, cities race to build the most expensive lines possible.

Though the feds may pay half the capital costs, local taxpayers must pay not only the other half but most operation and maintenance costs. These high costs have forced many transit agencies to cut bus service, harming transit riders.

The race to build streetcars is a race to waste money. San Antonio should stay out of this race and stick to comfortable, affordable bus service.

Randal O'Toole is a senior fellow with the Cato Institute and author of "The Worst of Both: The Rise of High-Cost, Low-Capacity Rail Transit."