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## Subsidizing Light Rail Is Like Subsidizing The Landline Telephone

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What would happen if your city, in the name of progress, started giving poorer residents vouchers for landline telephones rather than smartphones? Or if, rather than stocking public libraries with computers, so that people could write emails, your city installed fax machines? You would consider these unnecessary expenditures on outdated technologies. Yet when it comes to public transit, many cities splurge on modes designed for a different time and place—namely light rail.

Rail transit, such as streetcars, widely spurred America's urban growth during the industrial era, when automobiles hadn't yet been invented, and settlement patterns were dense. There are still a handful of dense legacy cities—New York City, San Francisco, Boston, Chicago and Washington, DC—that wouldn't function without passenger rail. But rail isn't convenient or practical in sprawling cities, although many have built entire systems nonetheless.

The Dallas metro, where many of the main growth corridors are 20 or 30 miles apart, has the nation's longest light rail system at 90 miles. The large desert known as Phoenix has a 26-mile line that largely runs past strip malls. Systems have been built in similarly-designed cities like Houston, Austin, Portland, Atlanta, Cleveland and St. Louis. Detroit, which suffers from just about every service failure imaginable, has nonetheless found the money—some of it federal—to build a streetcar along decrepit Woodward Avenue.

These projects have been championed by everyone from environmentalists, to urban density proponents, to business groups like the Chamber of Commerce, and for numerous reasons. Rail, it is thought, will get people out of cars and into transit; will spur infill growth; and will bring a “sense of place” to strategic corridors.

But it doesn't seem to do any of this, a conclusion drawn by numerous analysts, most notably Randal O'Toole. For decades, he has written in books, blogs, and as a Cato Institute analyst about the fool's errands of cities trying to reorient themselves around rail. They spend billions on building and maintaining systems, only to find that their cities largely function as they had before, via car use and fragmented development patterns.

For example, transit ridership rates don't dramatically increase following rail construction, and sometimes they even decline. O'Toole believes the ridership declines result because rail strips funding from buses, which are cheaper and more flexible. As O'Toole notes about Los Angeles:

The Southern California Rapid Transit District, ran buses for 92.6 million revenue miles in 1985. By 1995, to help pay for rail cost overruns, this had fallen to 78.9 million. Thanks to the court order in the NAACP case [to restore bus service in minority areas], this climbed back up to 92.9 million in 2006. But after the court order lapsed, it declined to 75.7 million in 2014. The riders gained on the multi-billion-dollar rail lines don't come close to making up for this loss in bus service.

Rail transit's role as a catalyst for dense development is also highly questionable—some lines have seen little development go up around them, and experienced high vacancy rates in existing buildings. Others have enjoyed adjacent mid- and high-rise growth. But it's hard to know, in the latter case, whether it was rail that spurred those developments, or some combination of government subsidies for developers, organic migration back into cities, land use deregulation to allow higher densities, or the construction of other nearby public amenities. San Antonio, for example, doesn't have light rail, but in the last few years has extended its famed River Walk north and south of downtown. It is seeing more growth along that linear stretch of parkland than Houston (which also has a fast-growing core) has seen along practically every light rail stop.

And as I've noted while traveling cross-country, light rail lines haven't proven to be particularly good place-makers. In the best-case scenarios, they are utilitarian pieces of infrastructure that present overhead wires, large concrete platforms, track entrapments for bicyclists, loud beeping noises, and grade-level crossing delays, making them about as charming as automobiles. In the worst-case scenarios—such as downtown Dallas' West End—their platforms become gathering spots for loiterers and petty crooks. There have been countless cases, meanwhile, where cities have enhanced their streetscapes without rail.

Yet cities continue building light rail. Perhaps the worst aspect of such outdated infrastructure is that it gives planners a perceived silver-bullet answer—“build a monorail!”—rather than forcing them to really think about their cities' mobility issues. They could be embracing new technologies—by bolstering their bus rapid transit networks using managed designated lanes; or by studying, subsidizing, or at very least allowing ridesharing platforms like Uber and Lyft; or by building better-timed streetlights, electronic congestion tolls, smart parking meters, and other modern traffic-flow solutions. Instead these officials, often backed by federal grants, are throwing money into a century-old transportation concept that is unfit for most U.S. cities. This is a lazy approach, and insofar as it perpetuates the congestion crisis, it undermines the urbanist cause, by making dense living less convenient. It's time for transportation planners to emphasize the future over the past.