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For Southwest Corridor, buses would be better, cheaper than light rail

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As I sat in Portland traffic the other day, I recalled the Southwest Corridor steering committee's decision to support light rail to Tualatin despite the fact that it would do little to relieve congestion. That decision might have been different if the council had more facts than were presented by Metro staff.

As city of Portland bicycle coordinator Roger Geller has since shown, Portland's transportation programs have greatly increased bicycle commuting, but light rail has proven a devastating failure. In 1980, before building light rail, 9.9 percent of Portland-area commuters took transit to work. By 2014, five light-rail lines later, it was only 8.1 percent.

Today, more city of Portland residents bicycle or walk to work than take transit. One reason for transit's decline is that the high cost of rail has forced TriMet to raise fares and cut bus service by 19 percent in the past 10 years.

Moreover, the steering committee's decision to support light rail over buses was based on misrepresentations by Metro staff. Metro's staff report accurately showed that a light-rail line can safely move no more than about 20 trains per hour or, at 266 passengers per train, 5,320 people per hour. However, the report also assumed that a busway can move only about 20 buses per hour, or, at 86 people per bus, about 1,720 people per hour. Metro staff projected that by the year 2035 demand on the route would be more than that, and several steering committee members said this persuaded them that rail was the only option.

In fact, Istanbul has a 31-mile busway that moves as many as 250 buses per hour in each direction. This busway transports well over twice as many people per day as all of TriMet's buses and trains combined. This shows that buses actually have a much higher capacity than light rail.

Worse, Metro's ridership projections fail to account for self-driving cars. By 2035, most of the people who Metro thinks will be riding light rail will in fact be getting around in shared, self-driving cars.

Given light rail's past failure and its even dimmer future, it would be foolish to spend \$2 billion on another light-rail line — or even \$1 billion on an exclusive busway. Instead, TriMet should spend about \$50 million or so on comfortable new Wi-Fi-equipped buses for high-frequency service in the Southwest Corridor.

Unlike trains, buses can leave the main corridor and serve lots of neighborhoods and destinations, allowing more people to go where they want in just one transit ride.

Metro should then spend a portion of the remaining \$1.95 billion relieving corridor congestion through better traffic signal coordination, removal of bottlenecks, and other low-cost ways of improving traffic flows. Another portion of the funds could improve bicycle facilities in places where bike ridership is likely to respond to those improvements.

Rather than spend huge amounts of money for the few people who will ride light rail, these steps could improve everyone's mobility at a far lower cost.

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