

December 9, 2011

<http://detnews.com/article/20111209/MIVIEW/112090374>

Deja voodoo: Detroit repeats Big City rail mistakes

RANDAL O'TOOLE
/ The Michigan View.com

Despite massive losses in similar transportation systems in Portland and Denver, Sen. Carl Levin, D-Michigan, and President Obama this fall announced a commitment of millions in federal taxpayer dollars to a Detroit light rail line down Woodward Avenue. "Detroit deserves a world-class transportation system," Levin crowed.

But light rail is sooo last century. In fact, it is a giant hoax perpetrated on the taxpayers of Detroit and the United States.

Developed in the 1930s, light rail is an obsolete form of transportation that does not promote economic development, relieve congestion, save energy, or reduce air pollution. All it does is cost lots of money.

Although promoters often call light rail "rapid transit," it is actually very slow.

Nationally, light-rail lines average little more than 20 miles per hour. When operating in city streets such as Woodward, they average less than 15 mph. Such slow speeds entice few people out of their cars. The \$60 million-per-mile cost of building light rail is enough to build a four-lane freeway. But the average light-rail line carries only about one-fifth of a freeway lane. Since most of those people would have ridden a bus, light rail offers little congestion relief.

Take Portland.

In 1980, 9.8 percent of Portland-area commuters took buses to work. Since then, Portland has built four light-rail lines, a commuter-rail line, and a streetcar line. Now only 7.5 percent of commuters take transit to work - partly because the high cost of rail transit forced the city to increase fares and cannibalize its bus routes.

Or consider Denver.

The Rocky Mountain city is planning six new rail lines at a cost of \$7 billion - or more than half of the region's transportation spending for the next decade. Denver planners admit that all these trains will take just one-half a percent of cars off the road. Denver could relieve more congestion by simply coordinating the city's traffic signals, which would cost less than one mile of light rail.

"The rail expansion tax of 2004 will likely go down in Denver history as the greatest swindle ever perpetrated in Colorado," says Jon Caldara, president of Colorado's Independence Institute and former Chairman of Denver's Regional Transportation District. "And given Colorado was a gold-rush state, that says a hell of a lot. The project will drain money from real transportation projects for decades to come."

Nor is light rail good for the environment. Nationally, light-rail operations use slightly less energy, per passenger mile, than the average car. But building light rail requires enormous amounts of energy that will

never be repaid by the annual energy savings.

Light rail's big selling point, that it promotes urban revitalization, is also a Big Lie.

When Portland opened its first light-rail line in 1986, planners rezoned the areas around each station for high-density, transit-oriented development. Ten years later, planners admitted that not one single such development had been built.

When asked why they didn't build around the light-rail stations, developers said there was no demand for such developments. So Portland began subsidizing transit-oriented developments, and to date has spent hundreds of millions of dollars on developmental subsidies. Such subsidies, using tax-increment financing, are now common in almost all cities that have light rail.

Tax-increment financing takes money that would have gone to schools, fire, libraries, and other urban services and spends it subsidizing developers. The schools and other agencies still need to serve the new developments, so other taxpayers must either pay more taxes or expect lower urban services.

Developers, and the politicians whose campaigns they support, win. Everyone else loses.

Cities that build light rail without development subsidies rarely get new development, while cities that offer development subsidies without light rail do get new development. In other words, the subsidies drive the development, not light rail.

Not only does light rail cost a lot, the costs never stop. Construction costs are only the beginning. These are followed by the subsidies to development, which in Portland cost taxpayers \$60 million a year. Then there are the maintenance costs - all those tracks, wires, stations, and expensive railcars are far more costly to maintain than buses.

Finally, transit agencies are never satisfied with just one light-rail line, and later lines are almost always far more expensive than the first. Portland spent under \$20 million a mile on its first light-rail line. The latest one is costing more than \$200 million a mile.

Buses can do anything light rail can do except spend lots of your money, but buses are faster, safer, and more flexible than trains. If traffic patterns change, bus routes can change overnight while moving a rail line takes years of planning and construction.

Rail advocates say you need rail transit to be a world-class city. The truth is that cities that use 1930s technologies to solve 21st century transportation problems are world-class chumps.

*Randal O'Toole (rot@cato.org) is a senior fellow with the Cato Institute and author of *Gridlock: Why We're Stuck in Traffic and What to Do About It*.*