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San Antonio Knows

Light rail doesn't work and voters don't want it — which doesn't keep city officials for trying to ram it through time and again.

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The essence of the Nanny State is the belief among too many government officials that people are too stupid to know what's best for them.

That attitude manifests itself across jurisdictions. It knows no state or regional boundary. Governing elites in every city, county, state and federal agency are prone to the malady.

While the epidemic is everywhere, it is on blatant display these days in San Antonio.

The people of San Antonio have spoken loudly and clearly, on multiple occasions, that they do not want to spend tax money on rail transit.

Given a chance to weigh in on the subject in 2000, the city's voters rejected light rail by a whopping 70 percent to 30 percent margin.

When the City Council broached the subject in 2014, the public rose up and the council was forced to abandon the idea once again.

With plenty of evidence that eternal vigilance would be the price of stopping light rail, opponents gathered almost 27,000 signatures to force a vote on an amendment to the city charter requiring a referendum for any light rail project in the city.

In case that didn't deliver the intended message, the vote on the proposition should have.

In May 2015 voters overwhelmingly approved the charter amendment — 67 percent to 33 percent — meaning voters now have the final word on light rail in San Antonio.

And still, city officials refuse to let go of the idea.

“It would be shortsighted not to show [rail] as an option in the SA Tomorrow Multimodal Transportation Plan,” according to Mike Frisbie, San Antonio's director of transportation and capital improvement.

Arrogant, not farsighted, is actually the word to describe maintaining rail as an option when voters have soundly rejected the idea.

But because San Antonio officials apparently have no faith in or regard for the judgment of the people who live there, perhaps they could be swayed by pure reason.

Light rail is a bad idea.

For urban transit, buses make infinitely more sense, economically and strategically.

“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,” [Randal O’Toole](#), a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute who studies urban growth, public land and transportation issues, wrote recently in opposition to a proposed rail line in Portland, Oregon.

If population patterns shift, buses can go with the people. Rail can’t, without another big building project and the accompanying costs.

Portland and San Antonio are separated by four climatic zones and more than 2,000 miles, but their city leaders suffer from the same delusions when it comes to light rail.

Study after study has shown that light rail is bad urban planning and bad economics. But the romance among liberal urban elites survives — along with the cronyism.

The construction industry and developers support politicians who support them. Those politicians hire bureaucrats who write plans that include rail. Developers rush to devise proposals to build along the planned line. It’s the circle of crony capitalism’s life.

“It’s not really about rail or offering commuters options, it’s about rent-seeking developers looking for their next handout, courtesy of San Antonio taxpayers,” [says rail foe Terri Hall](#), founder of Texans Uniting for Reform and Freedom.

Writing about the folly of light rail two decades ago, two Reason Foundation researchers pinpointed the problem.

“By their nature, myths are nearly impervious to attack, even by sound theory,” Thomas A. Rubin and James E. Moore II wrote.

Two decades on, the mythic quality of light rail persists because politicians and bureaucrats refuse to listen to the people they are supposed to serve.