



Worst time and S.A. worst place for rapid transit

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Re: "Transit plan has to move San Antonio into future," Editorial, April 16.

An editorial in the Express-News proposes that San Antonio build a "rapid transit" system that will "entice people out of their vehicles," "connect all parts of San Antonio," and "truly free people from traffic."

That's a nice fantasy. Reality is quite a bit different.

First, so-called "rapid transit" isn't very rapid. According to the American Public Transportation Association, true rapid-transit rail lines, also known as heavy rail, move at an average of just 20 miles per hour. Rapid bus averages 11 miles per hour, light rail averages 16 miles per hour, and streetcars average a pokey 7.4 miles per hour.

Since most people will neither work nor live right next to transit stations, door-to-door speeds are even lower and hardly enough to entice people out of their cars. This is especially true in San Antonio, one of the least-congested major cities in America where average driving speeds are 33 miles per hour.

Second, the average rapid-transit line planned or under construction today costs \$350 million per mile. The average light-rail line costs more than \$160 million per mile. Dedicated bus lanes cost at least \$20 million a mile.

By comparison, if right-of-way is available, existing freeways can be expanded for less than \$5 million per lane-mile. If right-of-way isn't available, elevated lanes resting on pillars in the median strips of existing freeways can be built for about \$10 million per lane-mile. A typical freeway lane moves several times more people per day than a light-rail line and more than most rapid-transit lines.

Third, rapid transit and light-rail lines built in the United States in the past few decades have almost all been failures.

In 1985, Atlanta had 25 miles of rapid-transit lines and the region's transit system — bus plus rail — carried about 155 million riders. By 2017, the region's population had more than doubled, and it had doubled the number of miles of rapid transit. Yet total transit ridership had shrunk to 131 million trips.

In 1984, San Francisco had 70 miles of rapid transit and the region's transit systems carried 488 million riders. By 2017, the region's population had grown by 25 percent and the region had doubled the number of miles of rapid transit. Yet transit ridership had fallen to 452 million trips.

Cities that built light rail instead of rapid transit haven't done much better. Before Dallas opened its first light-rail line, buses carried a meager 2.8 percent of the region's commuters to work. By 2016, with more than 100 miles of light rail, transit carried just 1.7 percent of commuters.

The reason for these disasters is that rail transit is so expensive that cities cannibalize their conventional bus systems to pay for rail. Rail construction invariably has cost overruns that average 50 percent. Operations and maintenance costs are also usually much higher than projected, while ridership and fare revenue is lower.

To pay for rail lines designed to entice middle-class people out of their cars, transit agencies end up cutting bus service to low-income and minority neighborhoods. That's not a fair trade-off.

Transit carries more than 10 percent of commuters to work in only a handful of American urban areas: New York, Chicago, Washington, Philadelphia, Boston, San Francisco and Seattle. One thing all these regions have in common is that their downtowns have at least 240,000 jobs. Downtown San Antonio barely has a fourth that number, making San Antonio one of the least-suited big cities in the world for building rapid transit.

Moreover, thanks partly to competition from ride-hailing services, transit ridership is falling almost everywhere, including a 19 percent drop in San Antonio between 2012 and 2017.

In 1933, San Antonio became the first big city in America to convert its rail system to buses because buses were more flexible, less expensive and could share rights of way with other vehicles. Buses can still cost-effectively serve San Antonio transit riders while the billions that would be needed to build rapid transit can instead be used to relieve congestion for everyone or just left in taxpayers' pockets.

Randal O'Toole is a senior fellow with the Cato Institute and author of the forthcoming book, "Romance of the Rails: Why the Passenger Trains We Love Are Not the Transportation We Need."