



A Reporter Rode Denver's Airport Light Rail- And You Won't Believe What Happened Next

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Here's a heartwarming story of a man who rode Denver's airport light rail once, and it worked for him, so now he wants everyone in his Virginia city to pay higher taxes to build light rail to the local airport in case he might want to ride it again someday. How thoughtful and touching.

Of course, there are a few problems with his story. First, what he rode wasn't light rail, which averages about 20 miles per hour; instead, he rode a commuter train that averages 38 miles per hour. So if he manages to persuade people in Virginia to build light rail to his local airport, he will get something far inferior to what he rode in Denver.

Second, the writer is guilty of survivorship bias, which is an assumption that because something worked for him, it will work for everyone else. But the Denver airport train doesn't work for everyone else, partly because it is unreliable and partly because transit is slow for anyone who isn't near an airport line station.

In fact, it works for very few people. There are just 144 daily round trips between downtown Denver and the airport. Of course, people can get on the train in places other than downtown Denver, but the majority of people in the Denver area who want to go to the airport would have to first go downtown, presumably on a bus or another rail line.

Unfortunately, the Virginia writer never bothered to ask what share of air travelers take the train and Denver's Regional Transit District hasn't released that information. But we know that, in 2016, an average of 104,000 air travelers a day went to or from Denver International Airport. RTD says that an average of 10,256 people get on or off the train at the airport station each weekday, which is slightly less than 10 percent of air travelers. Based on the experience in other cities, a significant number of those are from the more than 30,000 airport employees. So the train probably carries between 5 and 10 percent of air travelers.

Third, the writer has no perspective on the huge cost of rail, especially since he only had to pay a tiny fraction of the cost of his ride. From downtown to the airport, Supershuttle costs \$25 and Uber costs about \$35. The airport train is \$9, which sounds like a good deal. But Supershuttle and Uber drivers both pay gas taxes that covered virtually all of the costs of I-70 and the other

highways to the airport, while train riders paid none of the \$1.1 billion construction cost and only a fraction of the operating cost of the airport train.

Contrary to the above headline, you probably will believe that the Virginia writer made the same mistake that many Americans make when they ride trains in Europe. They see other people riding them and assume they are seeing a cross-section of the city or country they are visiting. They fail to find out about all the people who aren't riding the trains and why the trains don't work for those people. Nor do they ask who is paying for and who really benefits from all the subsidies to passenger rail transportation.

The reality is that the Denver airport line would have been a huge waste of money and should never have been built even if it hadn't had an 89 percent cost overrun. With that overrun, Denver is basically bankrupting itself so a few people can take a train to the airport which the city nearly bankrupted itself building.

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