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EDITORIAL: Light rail proposal is a boondoggle in the making

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In the age of Uber, many transportation analysts believe light rail will go the way of the Edsel.

It's one of many reasons building light rail along Maryland Parkway is a dubious idea. Nevertheless, a 36-member advisory panel last week recommended precisely that. The 8.7-mile line is estimated to cost \$750 million. Proponents say it will start moving passengers in 2025 if approved by the Regional Transportation Commission in September. Washington could fund part of the project.

Rejected options included spending \$335 million on bus lanes and performing \$29 million in improvements for Maryland Parkway.

Those options would be more prudent — and not just for financial reasons. Transit ridership has been falling nationwide for the past three years, dropping 5.9 percent in the 12 months leading up to March. Imagine what those numbers will look like when ride-hailing companies deploy fleets of self-driving cars in Las Vegas. The prospect of that happening before this light rail project debuts — especially given the inevitable delays — should not be ignored.

That speaks to a significant downside of light rail versus the most logical mass transit option, busing. Recent light rail projects have cost more than \$100 million a mile to build, and then you're stuck. It's not flexible and can't shift to meet changing consumer preferences. The most obvious one is demand itself. If the number of people wanting mass transit drops by 50 percent, the RTC can run half as many buses. Light rail doesn't offer that flexibility.

For some, that's good. "I just became so converted to urban light rail with regard to opportunities for economic development and redevelopment," said Warren Hardy of Associated Builders and Contractors, who served on the panel. But the job of a "transportation commission" isn't economic development. The RTC should focus its efforts on helping people get to where they want to go, not where bureaucrats want to send them.

The fascination that government planners have with mass transit flies in the face of public preference. According to the Cato Institute's Randall O'Toole, in 1917, "the average urban resident rode transit 287 times. By 1964, it had declined to a mere 62 trips per urban resident." Today, it's 37 trips per resident, a historical low.

And then there are the ridership projections and inevitable cost overruns. In order to drum up public support for these large expenditures, proponents of light rail routinely exaggerate how

many customers these trains will attract (see: the Las Vegas Monorail). Cost estimates are also regularly lowballed.

Las Vegas' biggest businesses have spent billions building the next big thing for entertainment. If the RTC board approves light rail, taxpayers will be stuck paying for a \$750 million monument to the 20th century.