



## Leave rail transit on the shelf for now

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The justification for rail projects is a constantly shifting public relations game. As one justification proves baseless, the messaging shifts. In 2000, the year Bexar County voters rejected light rail at the ballot box, 3-1, it was all about inducing transit ridership and reducing congestion.

Today it is about inducing “economic development.” But objective research shows that rail alone does not induce development. [CATO Institute's Randal O'Toole](#) has shown that developers in Portland, Ore., built no new transit-oriented developments along the city's light-rail line until the city began subsidizing such developments 10 years after that line opened. As in other cities, this suggests that subsidies, not the rail lines, stimulate development. Special tax financing districts and city-built parking garages are often necessary. But if development is the goal, then why spend hundreds of millions or billions of dollars on rail to achieve a different purpose?

Street cars and light rail are hugely expensive. The national average cost to build a route mile for a streetcar is \$40 million and for light rail is \$100 million, paid for largely by federal grants that can no longer be counted on. But San Antonio is counting on them.

With annual deficits of \$1.3 trillion, federal subsidies and grant programs are being eliminated. This year's congressional budget — for the first time — zeros out funding for new transit projects (that would be us). Assuming there is some chance this much-needed austerity will continue, is it wise for San Antonio to rest its long-term future on these funds?

But local politicians have decided to spend \$100 million in local funds to build the first leg of the system, committing us to decades of fiscal insanity to build the rest. Here is what to expect as a result:

Comprehensive international research indicates that in nine of 10 cases, rail construction projects suffered cost overruns from 40 percent to 100 percent, ruining the fiscal equations local budgets are built upon.

Local funds available for buses, and for bus rapid transit — which is five times more cost-effective in moving and attracting transit riders — will be cannibalized to pay for the rail system. People truly dependent on transit will find service sacrificed and fares increased.

The number of transit commuters will decrease not increase. According to the U.S. census, despite more than doubling the number of light-rail miles in Dallas, 3,700 fewer commuters rode the light-rail system in 2010 than in 2000. In Houston, 2,700 fewer commuters rode transit to work in 2010 compared to 2000. Taxpayers paid \$3.6 billion in Dallas and \$434 million in Houston for this declining ridership. Over the same period, San Antonio, which concentrated on improving bus service, experienced no decrease in transit commuting and has a transit work/trip/market share 50 percent above that of Dallas-Fort Worth.

San Antonio's City Council should tell VIA to invest in its bus system and shelve rail transit for the foreseeable future.