

Face the realities of rail

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I like trains. I even like trains that qualify for that vague term "transit," which has come to be favored by those who think you ought to live and go where "rational planners" want you to as opposed to where you may choose.

I love the Metro in D.C. As a law student, I rode the "T" all over Boston. I regard the London Underground as a thing of beauty. If I could hop on the subway outside of my Marquette University office and pop downtown to meet a lawyer friend for lunch, I'd be much more social than I am.

But there are many things that I like and much that I want. I don't always get to have them because we - well, most of us - live in a world of limited resources. Therein is the problem with much discussion of the need for "transit" in Milwaukee.

Most of it takes place with either no consideration of costs and benefits or with outlandishly fantastical claims about how much money millions and billions spent on transit will "save" or how much economic development will create. In a [May 26 Journal Sentinel op-ed](#), state Rep. Tamara Grigsby claims that transit investments earn a 277% annual return - something normally enjoyed only by certain segments of the "waste management" business in North Jersey. She quotes a "study" by the American Public Transportation Association that claims "transit" (that word again) can save households an "average" amount in transportation costs that exceeds the average amount households spend on transportation in 2008. "Transit," in other words, will make you money!

A [June 6 column](#) in Crossroads by John Gurda presents the history of public transportation in Milwaukee as a sort of morality play. The suggestion is that a proud and successful system (albeit one that could never pay for itself even when we were a larger and denser city with far fewer automobiles) was brought to its knees by nefarious or neglectful sources represented - ultimately - by the evil "tax-cutting" (more accurately "almost tax-freezing") Scott Walker. Think of Roger Rabbit's Dr. Doom dismantling the Red Car trolley and turning Toontown into a freeway.

But the sad fact of the matter is that passenger rail is an old technology of limited value. It works well when large numbers of people want to move between two fixed points. Later technology (i.e. buses and cars) provided us with greater flexibility, and Americans, being who we are, have taken advantage of it. There are, therefore, relatively few contexts in which rail is the best form of transportation.

Randal O' Toole of the Cato Institute recently evaluated rail transit systems on six separate criteria, including profitability, ridership, cost-effectiveness, contribution to economic development, impact on existing transportation networks and, quaintly, whether a system performs as well or better than a cable car. The results were not pretty. Not only did no American system pass all of these tests, very few pass any of them.

In an episode of "The Simpsons" called "Marge and the Monorail," a character named Lyle Lanley evokes Harold Hill of "The Music Man" in pushing the wonders of "genuine, bona fide, electrified six car monorail."

Life imitates art.

I, for one, am not unequivocally opposed to rail transit. But, please, show me the numbers.

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