



Mass transit: wasteful or wise investments?

By TOM GERMOND

Oct. 14, 2014

Plans to expand mass transit systems continue to take shape across the country, with hopes of moving people more effectively in areas as large as Washington, D.C., and as small as Yulee, Florida.

And the projects are not without controversy.

Advocates for mass transit say their plans are necessary to reduce congestion and that the indirect benefits, such as reduced accidents and economic development, are undervalued.

Initiatives for enhanced transit, from rail to bus service, are criticized for being not cost-effective and for failing to recognize the need for improved roadways.

The debate continues – as headlines appear routinely online of new developments in transit planning.

“It’s been a busy summer,” said Art Guzzetti, vice president of policy for the American Public Transportation Association.

In recent weeks, for example, a new line opened in Grand Rapids, Michigan, he said.

Earlier in the summer a rail line opened in Washington, D.C., extending from downtown about half way to Dulles International Airport. The second phase will connect the airport to the whole system.

Last year the Utah Transit Authority opened four rail lines. In the works are major projects in Denver, Honolulu, Baltimore, Charlotte, Boston, San Francisco, Los Angeles and others.

“I can say in my long 35-year career the pipeline is as robust now as it has ever been,” Guzzetti said. “It’s reflecting demand.”

Austin, Texas, is ranked among the top 10 cities in America for traffic congestion in 2013 in one survey. That area's transportation planners readily agree that its transportation system can't keep up with the growth in the county.

In February, Austin Mayor Lee Leffingwell said the city's traffic problems are a crisis that affects the city's safety, environment and quality of life.

"For years, we did mostly just sit and watch as our population grew, and our traffic got worse" while other cities invested billions in rail, Leffingwell told the American Statesmen.

The Austin City Council recently approved a ballot proposition in August to finance portions of a mobility plan. It calls for a \$600 million bond issue, a 9.5-mile rail line and \$400 million to pay the costs of roadway improvements.

Opponents of the rail proposal said the project will not solve congestion problems and does not serve riders that need more transit options now. They also contend that it contains frills, such as jogging and hiking trails.

Officials in Phoenix, New Mexico, decided to create a citizen's committee to help improve public transportation in the city. Mayor Greg Stanton said he wants to triple the amount of light-rail lines in the city, increase bus routes and make the city friendlier to bikes and pedestrians, KJZZ, a public radio station, reported.

"Those cities that advance when it comes to great public transportation, arts and culture, education – those are going to be the advanced cities in moving forward in this hyper competitive, international economy," Stanton said. "We've got to get this right."

But at least one city councilman has said that he doesn't think voters are ready for any tax increases.

Long-range projects are under consideration in Florida. The Jacksonville Transportation Authority envisions commuter rails stations along several corridors throughout Northeast Florida, bringing St. Augustine, Fernandina Beach, Green Cove Springs, Yulee, Flagler County, Palm Coast, Bunnell and other nearby counties closer to Jacksonville, creating business opportunities.

The opening of the first phase of the 32-mile Sun Rail commuter rail line connects Volusia, Seminole and Orange Counties with downtown Orlando. Plans call for it to be complete in 2016, running from DeLand in Volusia County to Poinciana in Osceola County. It would be 61.5 miles

from beginning to end with 17 station stops along the way. The system was criticized in the planning stages for its low ridership and cost projections.

Closer to home, Hillsborough County officials are considering plans to ask voters in 2016 to pay an extra 1 cent sales tax to finance transportation improvements, including buses, walkways, roads and rail. Hillsborough voters defeated a similar referendum on a proposed tax for transportation in 2010.

Many focus groups participants in an analysis of the referendum in 2011 expressed concerns that the Tampa area and Hillsborough County is too sprawling, too “car-centric” and too dispersed for mass transit to make an impact.

Hillsborough County Administrator Mike Merrill has said mass transit improvements are needed to attract young professionals, families and business to the areas.

Arguments over transit options

TIME reported in July that a survey showed just 8 percent of U.S. respondents said they would take public transit instead of a personal vehicle.

Is the “car-centric” mindset a deterrent to mass transit development?

Guzzetti points out that when he started his career around 1980 there were seven light-rail systems in the country. Now there are 38.

Ridership trends across the country are up, not in just pockets, he said.

“The fact is ridership is outpacing population growth and vehicles miles traveled. Not in a short-term trend, but over a long, sustained 20-year trend. And that’s continuing,” Guzzetti said.

People are moving to the cities and for those regions to grow – population wise and economically – transit has to be a part of the picture, he said.

“It’s not the total answer. You are going to need a good road system as well,” he said. “But you need a balanced system and transit has to be part of it or else your region will suffer.”

An American Public Transportation Association report said investment in transit can yield 50,731 jobs per \$1 billion invested and offers a 4 to 1 economic return.

The economy overall wouldn’t work without roads and transit, Guzzetti said.

“People use the system either to make money or spend money. They are doing it for a reason. The reason is commerce. Commerce does not happen without connectivity,” he said.

Randall O’Toole, a national public policy analyst for the Cato Institute and critic of light rail, said a congressional act in 1991 created the New Starts fund that spurred rail transit projects across the county.

“The New Starts Fund basically said, ‘If you want to have a small improvement to your transit system, you will get a little bit of money. If you want a really, really expensive transit system you will get a lot of money.’ So the more expensive transit cities can develop, the more money they got out of this federal fund. It became a race to build the most wasteful transit system they could,” O’Toole said.

To relieve congestion, O’Toole suggests low-cost techniques such as traffic signal coordination and rapid bus transit. He also contends that economic development created by light rail stems from tax-increment financing and other subsidies.

“The availability of a large pot of federal money is tempting cities and transit agencies to build extremely wasteful transit projects even though buses can do everything the rail can do for less money and yet the buses are faster, safer and more comfortable ...” O’Toole said.

For less than the cost of one mile of light rail, Pinellas County could probably coordinate all the traffic signals in the county and do far more to relieve traffic congestion than 100 miles of light rail would ever do, he said.

Since the 1800s the value of different modes of transportation in America has been debated – and the debate is certain to continue, whether one’s vision getting from Point A to Point B safely and swiftly means riding a bicycle, catching a train or bus or relaxing in a driverless automobile.

Editor’s note: This is the second segment of a two-part series on Greenlight Pinellas and other issues related to mass transit.