



Light-Rail Systems Are a False Promise

By Randal O'Toole

Rail transit has become such an albatross around the necks of the American cities that have it that it is hard to imagine that anyone of good will would wish it upon Kansas City. Rail transit is expensive to build, operate, and maintain.

Summary

Light rail transit is expensive to build, operate, and maintain, requiring regular infusions of new taxpayer financing as construction costs escalate and system components wear down and need to be replaced. Rapid-transit bus routes are more flexible and can provide better, faster, safer transit than light rail at a far lower cost

Main text word count: 420

One of rail transit's dirty secrets is that the entire system — rails, cars, electrical facilities, stations — must be replaced, rebuilt or rehabilitated roughly every 30 years.

One of rail transit's dirty secrets is that the entire system — rails, cars, electrical facilities, stations — must be replaced, rebuilt or rehabilitated roughly every 30 years. This costs almost as much as the original construction, which means for taxpayers that rails are a “pay now, pay more later” proposition.

The Chicago Transit Authority is on the verge of financial collapse. The agency estimates it needs \$16 billion it doesn't have to rehabilitate tracks and trains. To keep the trains running, the agency siphoned money away from the city's bus system and lost a third of its bus riders between 1986 and 1996.

Newer systems face other financial challenges. San Jose's light-rail system put the city's transit agency so far in debt that when sales tax revenues fell short early in this decade, it was forced to cut bus and rail service by 20 percent.

Rail construction almost always costs more than the original estimates. Denver voters approved a 119-mile rail system in 2004 on the promise that it would cost \$4.7 billion to build it by 2017. The current estimate is up to \$7.9 billion, and the regional transit agency says the system might not be complete until 2034.

Once built, light-rail systems never live up to their promises, even in places like Portland. Before building light rail, Portland's bus system carried 9.8 percent of the region's transit riders to work. Today, thanks to cutbacks in the bus system forced by the high cost of rail, transit carries just 7.6 percent.

Nor is rail transit good for the environment. Most U.S. light-rail lines use more energy, per passenger mile, than an SUV. Considering that most of Missouri's electricity comes from fossil fuels, a Kansas City light rail, like the ones in Dallas, Denver, and

Show-Me Institute Mission:
Advancing liberty with responsibility
by promoting market solutions
for Missouri public policy

Cleveland, is also likely to produce more greenhouse gases per passenger mile than an SUV.

Buses can provide better, faster, safer transit service than light rail at a far lower cost. Light rail is a hoax perpetrated on taxpayers by companies that profit from designing and building rail lines.

Rail advocates tell Kansas Citians that they need to catch up with other cities that have rail transit. I suggest instead that Kansas City should be proud not to fall for the light-rail hoax.

Randal O'Toole is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute, and author of the Show-Me Institute study, "Review of Kansas City Transit Plans."

Buses can provide better, faster, safer transit service than light rail at a far lower cost. Light rail is a hoax perpetrated on taxpayers by companies that profit from designing and building rail lines.

Attention Editors and Publishers

Show-Me Institute commentaries are designed to be reprinted in newspapers and other publications. Reprint permission is hereby granted, provided that proper credit is given to the author. Electronic versions are available at the Show-Me Institute website, www.showmeinstitute.org.

We request, but do not require, that those who reprint one or more of our commentaries notify us of publication, for our records: info@showmeinstitute.org

The author of this commentary is available for interviews. To speak with the author or other Show-Me Institute scholars, please contact:

The Show-Me Institute
7777 Bonhomme Ave. Suite 2150
Clayton, MO 63105

Phone: 314-726-5655
Fax: 314-726-5656

www.showmeinstitute.org
info@showmeinstitute.org