

# Why Light Rail Is Wrong for Clackamas County

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## *Light Rail Does Not Reduce Congestion*

Portland's light rail carries only about 1 percent of passenger travel in the Portland area, which is not enough to make a difference on our crowded roads. If anything, new light-rail lines add to congestion when they run in or cross streets.

Rail advocates love to brag that Portland's transit ridership grew by almost 60 percent in the 1990s. What they fail to mention is that TriMet ridership grew by 180 percent in the 1970s, when the agency was running only buses. This is because TriMet was able to improve bus service throughout the region.

Light rail is an extremely expensive way to improve service in only a few corridors. Due to the high cost of light rail, TriMet cannot make many improvements in bus service, and at times has had to reduce bus service to pay for rail cost overruns.

In 1980, 9.8 percent of all commuters in the Portland area rode transit to work. Today, thanks to the high cost of light rail, only 7.6 percent of Portland-area commuters ride transit to work. How does that relieve congestion?

## *Light Rail Does Not Save Energy*

A light-rail car may use less energy per passenger than an equally loaded bus. But light rail does not reduce the number of miles of bus operations. Instead, TriMet changes corridor buses that once took people directly to their destinations to feeder buses, which require people to change to the light-rail line.

These feeder buses are necessary for transit-dependent people. But most people end up driving to the light-rail stations, so the feeder buses run emptier than the corridor buses they replaced. The result is that the transit system as a whole consumes more energy and emits more greenhouse gases than before the light-rail line opened.

- After TriMet opened the light-rail line to Gresham, its energy consumption per passenger mile increased by 5 percent, and its CO<sub>2</sub> emissions per passenger mile increased by 13 percent.
- After TriMet opened the light-rail line to Hillsboro, its energy consumption per passenger mile increased by 7 percent, and its CO<sub>2</sub> emissions per passenger mile increased by 11 percent.

This does not even count the huge energy cost required to build light rail. It costs energy to build roads, too, but

because roads are so much more heavily used than transit, the energy cost of roads per passenger mile is far lower than for rail transit.

## *Light Rail Does Not Stimulate Development*

Rail advocates claim that light rail stimulates billions of dollars of improvements and redevelopment. Even if you want five-story apartment buildings and mixed-use developments in your neighborhood—which most people do not—light rail does not do a very good job of stimulating such development.

In 1986, when Portland opened its first light-rail line, the city rezoned all the land near light-rail stations for high-density, transit-oriented development. Ten years later, planners reported to the city council that not a single development of this sort had been built.

“It is a myth to think that the market will take care of development along transit corridors,” said Portland City Commissioner Charles Hales. Hales proposed to subsidize such developments with property tax breaks and a variety of other subsidies.

To date, Portland has given close to \$2 billion in subsidies to developers in the Pearl District, the South Waterfront District, the airport, on Interstate Avenue, and in other areas served by light rail or streetcars. Gresham, Beaverton, and other cities have also subsidized development near light-rail stations. It is these subsidies, not the rail lines, that have stimulated development.

## *Light Rail Is Not High-Capacity Transit*

Rail advocates like to claim that rail lines can carry as many people as an eight-lane freeway. But, other than New York subways, no rail line in the country comes close to carrying as many people as even one freeway lane.

The average mile of Portland-area light-rail line carries less than 20 percent as many people per day as the average mile of Portland-area freeway lane. Yet light rail costs far more to build than a freeway lane.

## *Buses Are Better than Rail*

Portland replaced its streetcar system in the 1950s for a good reason: buses are faster, more flexible, and cost less than rail. Studies show that transit riders don't care

whether the vehicle they are riding on has rubber tires or steel wheels. They care instead about the quality of service. When TriMet improved bus service on the #33 McLoughlin bus in 2000, it gained 20 percent more riders.

Buses can run more frequently than rail, they can run as fast or faster than rail, and they can serve more neighborhoods than rail, all at a far lower cost. Buses can also move more people: a bus lane can move ten times as many people as a light-rail line.

### *Light Rail Is a Tragic Waste of Money*

The Sellwood Bridge is so badly deteriorated that it has been closed to bus and truck traffic; several other bridges in the Portland area are also overdue for replacement; and Metro claims it doesn't have the money to relieve congestion at some of the worst bottlenecks in the Portland area. At times like these, spending money on light rail is a tragic misplacement of priorities.

Because of the high cost of light rail, Portland is spending well over half of its transportation dollars on a transit system that carries less than 2.5 percent of all travel (including both buses and rail). The result is that your time is wasted in traffic and your car wastes fuel and emits more pollution. Portland should spend money on actions that will relieve congestion, not make it worse.

### *Sources*

Data in this fact sheet come from the U.S. Department of Transportation's reports, *Highway Statistics* and *National Transit Database*, and from the U.S. Department of Energy report, *Transportation Energy Data Book*. All of these reports are available on line.