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REVIEW OF KANSAS CITY TRANSIT PLANS

By Randal O'Toole

Light rail systems have become the modern transportation accessory of choice for American urban areas in the 21st century. Since 1980, transit agencies in nearly two dozen urban areas have built or are building light-rail lines, or have upgraded older streetcar lines to light-rail standards.

Kansas City has, until recently, resisted the siren song of streetcars and light rail. Between 1997 and 2003, Kansas City voters had six opportunities to vote on light rail, and in almost every case voters rejected rail by 60 percent or more. When it was put back on the ballot in 2006, the city leaders who had traditionally opposed it assumed it would fail again and did not campaign strongly against it. As a result, the new measure — which called for a 27-mile light-rail line and an aerial tramway — passed by 53 percent.

Since the election, several flaws have been identified in the measure, including:

- The Kansas City Area Transportation Authority (KCATA) estimates that the costs of the proposed line will be at

least 50 percent more than projected by proponents;

- The measure presumed local funding would be matched by federal funds, but the Federal Transit Administration says that it would reject such funding because the measure diverts funds from buses to rail;
- The proposed alignment goes through a city park, which would require another vote.

Because of these and other problems, the City Council repealed the ballot measure on November 8. But many in the city presume that some form of “starter” light-rail system will still be built. The *Kansas City Star*, for example, has proposed a 9.75-mile streetcar line financed with a quarter-cent sales tax and gasoline taxes. A citizen task force appointed by the mayor, the City Council, and the Kansas City Area Transportation Authority has proposed a 12- to 14-mile “fast streetcar” route to be financed by a three-eighth-cent sales tax. Indeed, a follow-up vote on a new light rail plan is planned for November 2008.

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All of these proposals assume that the benefits of light rail or streetcars are greater than the costs, and would justify the hundreds of millions of dollars that taxpayers would need to invest in the projects. But is that really true? Before the city decides to spend large amounts of money on any sort of rail project, it should ask:

- Is rail a cost-effective way of moving people?
- Is rail a cost-effective way of solving congestion, pollution, or other problems?
- Does rail revitalize cities or promote a superior urban form?

These reasons have all been offered as justifications for building light rail in Kansas City and elsewhere. Kansas City can look at the experiences of other cities to see whether any of them are valid.

Rail Operations Experience

Rail transit is far more expensive to build than highways or new bus lines. The average light-rail line built in recent years cost about \$50 million per mile — enough to build a four-lane freeway. Because the average light-rail line carries only about 30 percent as many passenger miles per route mile as the average urban freeway lane, rail transit is a high-cost solution to many passenger transport problems.

The high cost of rail transit means that rail construction often leads to reductions in transit service and losses in transit ridership, thus undermining the goal of transit improvements. Cost overruns, revenue shortfalls, and the long-range costs of maintaining rail systems can all force cuts in transit service or spur fare increases that reduce transit ridership.

If rail transit cannot significantly increase transit ridership, it is certainly not going to reduce congestion. Light rail simply does not take enough cars off the road to relieve congestion — at least, not enough congestion to justify its enormous cost.

Light-rail lines in California and Oregon produce significantly less greenhouse gases than the average auto because half or more of the electricity consumed in those states comes from hydroelectric power. Missouri, which gets nearly 90 percent of its electricity from fossil fuels, is not so fortunate. The Saint Louis light-rail system, for example, emits 0.48 pounds of CO₂ per passenger mile, which is only slightly lower than the average passenger car's emissions of 0.54 pounds per passenger mile.

The factor that seems to have the greatest influence on transit commuting is the concentration of jobs in a central transit hub. Unlike some other large cities, Kansas City has only about 50,000 jobs in its central business district, less than 7 percent of the jobs in the entire metropolitan area. This suggests that Kansas City is a poor candidate for rail transit.

The evidence from other cities demonstrates that light rail does not lead to an increase in overall transit ridership, does not reduce traffic congestion in any noticeable manner, does not save money for the operators or the users, and does not reduce energy consumption or pollution. Light rail, furthermore, only leads to urban redevelopment in cases where the development itself is heavily subsidized by the government.



Alternatives for Kansas City

If Kansas City truly wants to improve transit service, there are many possible ways to do so. Instead of building a rail line, Kansas City could continue or accelerate the expansion of KCATA's successful bus-rapid transit lines. The region's first bus-rapid transit line boosted corridor ridership by close to 30 percent. The 9-mile Troost route is estimated to have start-up costs of about \$30 million and annual operating costs of about \$350,000. So, for the cost of one start-up rail project, Kansas City could add at least 10 bus-rapid transit routes, with operating money left over to improve bus services on other routes as well.

Another model can be found in Las Vegas. Between 1990 and 2000,

Las Vegas increased its bus services tenfold. The new system carries seven times as many riders and has nearly quadrupled the city's per-capita ridership. No city that built rail lines has seen anything close to this kind of growth in ridership. Las Vegas was able to make these improvements economically by contracting out all of its bus operations to a private company. Contracted bus services cost only about 50 to 60 percent as much, per bus mile, as buses operated directly by transit agencies. The Las Vegas alternative would allow Kansas City to make significant improvements in its transit system at no additional cost to taxpayers. Instead of an inflexible rail line that requires continuous expensive maintenance, Kansas City would have

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Transit's Share of Commuting

	1970	1980	1990	2000	2005	YEAR OPENED
Atlanta	10.4%	9.1%	5.9%	4.1%	4.0%	1976
Baltimore	16.9%	12.3%	9.3%	7.4%	7.6%	1984
Buffalo	12.3%	16.4%	5.5%	4.1%	3.6%	1986
Dallas	5.7%	4.0%	2.7%	2.2%	1.9%	1996
Denver	4.8%	6.4%	4.7%	4.9%	4.3%	1994
Houston	6.0%	3.5%	4.5%	3.8%	3.2%	2004
Los Angeles	4.8%	5.9%	5.6%	6.0%	5.8%	1988
Miami	6.3%	4.3%	3.7%	3.3%	3.6%	1984
Minneapolis	9.5%	10.0%	6.2%	5.5%	4.8%	2004
Portland	7.0%	9.8%	6.7%	7.7%	7.6%	1987
Sacramento	2.7%	4.1%	2.8%	2.9%	2.4%	1987
Salt Lake City	2.4%	5.5%	3.5%	3.6%	3.1%	1999
San Diego	4.8%	3.5%	3.5%	3.6%	3.3%	1981
San Francisco	16.0%	16.8%	14.5%	14.6%	15.9%	1972
San Jose	2.4%	3.1%	3.1%	3.6%	3.3%	1989
Saint Louis	9.2%	6.9%	3.5%	2.9%	2.8%	1994
Washington, D.C.	17.6%	16.7%	15.6%	13.7%	15.7%	1976

"Year Opened" is the fiscal year that rail riders first appear in transit agency reports.

Source: Journey-to-work data for urbanized areas from the decennial censuses and the American Community Survey for 2005.



a first-class bus system that could provide fast, frequent service to those who want an alternative to the automobile.

Atlantic City provides a glimpse of what a private transit system would look like. The taxpayer-funded New Jersey Transit system provides rail and bus services connecting Atlantic City with Manhattan, Philadelphia, and other cities in New Jersey. But within Atlantic City, bus services are provided by the Atlantic City Jitney Association. Each “jitney” is a small bus, individually owned by its driver, that follows one of several fixed routes. Fares are low, service is frequent, and the jitneys operate 24 hours a day.

These alternatives, alone or combined, would allow Kansas City to improve its mass transit system, serve the people who depend on mass transit, and efficiently spend taxpayer dollars.

Conclusions

Kansas City does not need light rail to be a “world-class city.” It does not need to spend hundreds of millions (or billions) of dollars on an expensive transit system in order to be “hip” or “cool.” Nor does it need to worry about “falling behind its peer cities” because it does not have an expensive rail system.

Kansas City does need to worry about providing cost-effective transit service to

Transit's Share of Travel, in 2005 and Before Light-Rail Construction

	2005	BEFORE LRT	CHANGE
Baltimore	1.4%	2.0%	-0.6%
Buffalo	0.6%	1.4%	-0.8%
Dallas	0.6%	0.6%	0.0%
Denver	1.4%	1.3%	0.1%
Houston	1.0%	1.0%	0.0%
Los Angeles	1.8%	1.9%	-0.1%
Minneapolis	1.1%	0.9%	0.2%
Portland	2.2%	2.5%	-0.3%
Sacramento	0.7%	0.9%	-0.2%
Salt Lake City	1.2%	1.2%	0.0%
San Diego	1.1%	1.4%	-0.3%
San Jose	0.9%	1.1%	-0.2%
Saint Louis	0.7%	0.7%	0.0%

Transit's share of travel is measured by comparing transit passenger miles from the National Transit Database (ntdprogram.gov) with the sum of transit passenger miles and roadway miles. Roadway miles, in turn, are calculated by multiplying vehicle miles of travel — as reported in table HM72 of the United States Department of Transportation's annual Highway Statistics (tinyurl.com/2cc3oj) — by 1.6, which is the average number of occupants per vehicle as reported by the U.S. DOT's National Household Transportation Survey (tinyurl.com/2xsqa6).

those who want and need it. Rail transit is not that service. Kansas City does need to worry about keeping its tax burden low so it can compete with its peer cities. Rail transit, on the other hand, requires huge tax subsidies. Kansas City also needs to worry about finding cost-effective solutions to traffic congestion. Rail transit is not one of those solutions, and in fact is more likely to worsen congestion than solve it.

For more details, please see Show-Me Policy Study no. 13, which is available at www.showmeinstitute.org.



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