Imagine that today you are put in charge of running MetroLink. In your first day on the job, this is what you learn:

- Operating revenue is not close to covering expenses—MetroLink’s parent organization, Metro Transit (which also includes MetroBus and Call-A-Ride), covers only about 18 percent of its expenses with fares from riders. The rest of the revenue comes from local, state, and federal subsidies.
- Ridership is down by over 20 percent since 2014, so the revenue picture isn’t getting better.
- The primary reason people don’t want to ride MetroLink is that they don’t feel safe. A comprehensive study of MetroLink’s performance released earlier this year found that 71 percent of people surveyed cited security concerns as their biggest criticism of MetroLink (page 4).

So, given that MetroLink is (1) solidly dependent on subsidies for the foreseeable future, because (2) ridership is declining, because (3) riders fear for their safety, what would you prioritize?

Would you decide to build nine more miles of MetroLink for almost $700 million?
Back in the real world, this is what Metro intends to do, apparently missing the point that if people don’t feel safe riding MetroLink, they’re not going to feel safer just because it covers more ground.

Violent crimes on the MetroLink—defined as homicide, shootings, aggravated assault, and rape—numbered 197 during 2017. Proportionally, there were 1.4 violent crimes per 100,000 boardings in 2017. From January to October in 2018, violent MetroLink crimes in St. Louis declined 12 percent according to the head of the city’s MetroLink police unit, although it is unknown if this trend also held system-wide.

Metro justifiably believes that the safety perception spurred the 11 percent drop in ridership between 2017 and 2018, and recently approved a plan that would allow them to hire off-duty sheriff’s deputies for extra security. But should we assume that the recent dip in violent-crime numbers will repair MetroLink’s image and bring riders back? Or would it be smarter to wait and see if the positive trend continues before sinking $700 million into a massive expansion?

Even if people eventually feel safe riding MetroLink, the wisdom of adding another line is open to many questions. This much should be clear, though: MetroLink should not be laying more track when people don’t even want to ride what they already have.

Tags:

- Metrolink

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