

Light rail stands for choice, not reduced congestion

BY KEVIN KRIZEK
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I RECENTLY heard Seattle referred to as home for 60 square miles of the most congested and traffic-snarled roads in the nation. I am also frustrated to hear of Sound Transit's estimated \$500 million in cost overruns. Both are horrifying prospects indeed.

Traffic-snarled roads and cost overruns tend to dominate all talk about city planning efforts, especially those about light-rail planning. Although one long-range goal of transit planning is reducing congestion, I believe it should have at least two other goals: increasing choice and shaping metropolitan form.

For example, the Sound Transit plan should be more than getting us out of our cars into glistening trains that whisk us from place to place. The plan we voted for is a critical part of a planning strategy, calling for transportation planning to be integrated with land-use planning. In its simplest sense, this strategy aims to spur transit use by increasing the density of development and mix of land uses around stations. The concept is called transit-oriented development (TOD), and light rail is its darling.

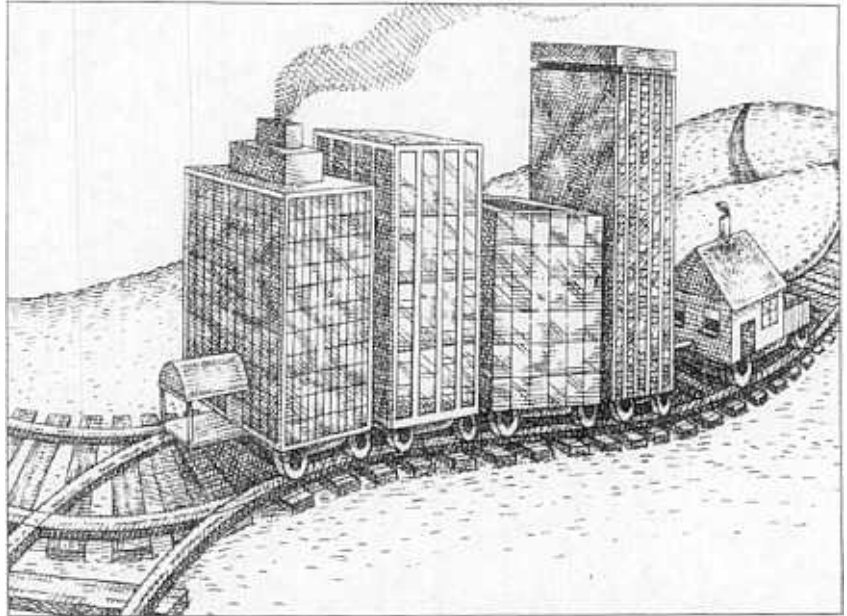
For many, TOD and rail go hand in hand and the TOD concept is quickly hijacked into light rail's beleaguered history. People point to the capital and maintenance expenses to support their cases against both light rail and TODs. They claim we:

- Need our cars for multi-trip errands;
- Shop at land-hungry stores like Home Depot and Target, and
- Prefer homes on big lots with driveways and basketball hoops.

The anti-light-rail arguments are convincing; many of us realize how many cars and square miles of congested roads we will do away with for the billions we spend — precious few.

But the TOD/light-rail pair should aim for broader goals than “getting the other guy off the road so I can drive faster.” A successful TOD can provide increased choices for ways to travel and places to live, as well as leverage future growth consistent with the environmental policies of the Pacific Northwest. By better focusing our efforts on TODs, we can provide:

- Shopping, banking, day care and other everyday needs in close proximity to each other;
- Everyday needs within walking distance to residential areas;
- Communities in which we do not have to drive for everything;



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- A mix of housing types, densities and costs;
- Development focused on cheaper and more flexible forms of transit such as buses or vanpools;
- Development with a vibrant neighborhood and a sense of character, complete with cafés or taverns,
- A solid commitment for providing services that can then be used to shape future development decisions.

TODs quietly satisfy these other needs. Light rail and TODs should not be solely considered a 21st-century bureaucratic idolatry to soothe our congestion woes. The burning issue is not how successful light rail will be in getting people out of their cars. Rather, transit planning is a commitment to those who may prefer transit-oriented developments. More often than not, their preferences are inhibited by zoning and other exclusionary regulations. If we work to expand their choices and accommodate a variety of lifestyles, we may be surprised at the outcomes.

Consider for example, TODs untapped potential to meet the needs of:

- The elderly who can drive, but prefer alternatives to the car;
- Baby boomers who are escaping their castle-type homes and upkeep of large lawns,
- Urbanites seeking lower car expenses and longing for city neighborhoods with amenities, accessibility and character.

Currently, too few places come close

to the qualities and advantages of TODs. Where TOD neighborhoods are fully occupied or unavailable, people have but no choice to live in places that force them to drive. There is a reason why it is difficult to find a place to live in (insert your favorite Seattle neighborhood here).

It is easy to convince ourselves that people will continue to drive. Those opposed to light rail want a “real” answer to congestion and not an “alternative” that few will use. But people value having choices and it is unfair to assume everyone's desires are similar.

If we, as a community, balk at spending \$4 billion in transit subsidies and are unwilling to regulate drive-alone travel through pricing schemes, then we need to better emphasize other planning strategies. Too much attention goes to light rail and not enough goes to TODs. We see this in the Sound Transit planning efforts.

While light rail and TOD go hand in hand, evaluating the pair by highlighting the inefficiencies of light rail does not do justice to the myriad benefits offered by TODs. Light-rail transit planning should focus less on taking cars off the road and more on land-use strategies that increase choice for all. And in the long run we may end up with fewer square miles of congestion.

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