

# Light rail service doesn't seem to make sense for Tulsa

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=514#more-514>

Tulsa City Councilor Rick Westcott is promoting the concept of light rail in Tulsa as a means to reduce our carbon footprint. While it is gratifying to know that he doesn't believe that global warming is man-made, at least according to a recent Tulsa World article, light rail is something that shouldn't be taken at its face value.

Tulsa residents and residents of the outlying suburbs need to understand how light rail works, what can make it successful, and what can make it fail before they presumably will get the opportunity to vote for the massive expense that is characteristic of light rail.

Not that other means of transportation are any cheaper. Building roads and streets are obviously very expensive, but there is more to meeting the transportation means of a city than just their initial cost and maintenance.

From a business standpoint, the efficiency of transportation has a lot to do with the city as a whole to generate income. Light rail can move large groups of people efficiently from station to station, but that is only part of the story. How people arrive at a rail station and how they arrive at their final destination after stepping off of the train is equally important.

The real impetus behind light rail is something called Transit Oriented Developments. The Smartcode defines TOD's as a "Regional Center Development with transit available or proposed" and a RCD as a "Community Type based upon a partial or entire Long Pedestrian Shed, oriented toward a strong Town Center." A Long Pedestrian Shed is defined as "an area, approximately circular, that is centered on a Common Destination" and is a "1/2 mile radius or 2,640 feet...." This represents a leisurely walk of about ten minutes.

Tulsa's on-staff urban planner, according to a KTUL interview, sees light rail connecting downtown to areas of the city that need redevelopment that are adjacent to existing train tracks. Presumably the redevelopment areas would be, by default and design, Transit Oriented Developments.

A study done by the Cascade Policy Institute in 2003 took a critical look at light rail to see if it was as successful as it was acclaimed to be. Specifically, it looked at Orenco Station, a TOD near Portland, Oregon, that had developed near a light rail line.

The study showed that much of the ridership came from several large employers (one was Intel) that provided shuttle service from their offices to the light rail station. In comparison to actual capacity, ridership was fairly low and most of the riders took advantage of a park-and-ride parking lot at the rail station near their homes, even when their homes were nearby.

Despite this, the study stated that, "In walking or driving through Orenco station, one is struck by the comfortable combination of residential and commercial use. This multi-use character is part of New Urbanism and often doesn't work because the uses that are being combined are

inconsistent or the planner forbade adequate parking,” and that residents were generally satisfied, but not because of the light rail service.

The study quoted a planner from The University of Washington in the Transportation Quarterly as saying, “most Orenco Station residents appear to have been attracted to the community more because of its upscale character, design characteristics and open space rather than because of its transit access. In fact, for most residents, access to the rail line is not very appealing. Many live up to a mile away.”

If light rail is supposed to be within the “Long Pedestrian Shed” of 1/2 mile, why did so many live farther away? Because market forces caused the areas of Orenco Station furthest from the rail line to develop first. Apparently no one wants to live too close to the tracks.

So is a light rail system practical for Tulsa? A recent feasibility study by INCOG seems to indicate it would be, so much so that they no longer support widening the Broken Arrow Expressway to eight lanes. Planners at INCOG believe 2,000 people will choose to ride light rail from Broken Arrow to Tulsa, and that it will cost up to \$100 million to implement the route. That’s \$50,000 each just to recoup the initial cost. Does that make sense?

Light rail needs a great deal of study before we invest in it. The Cascade study concluded that the Orenco Station TOD had met few of its goals of improving air quality and decreasing traffic, that the light rail service was provided at a very high cost, and that Orenco Station’s success was due to being an auto-oriented community.

Perhaps Tulsa should recognize that it, too, is auto-oriented, and focus on how to make its auto traffic better. Tulsa businesses can work more efficiently if we have the freedom that the automobile gives us.

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