

Light rail just won't work in Tulsa

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=892#more-892>

In last week's article, I discussed how Portland, Oregon, has long been held up as a classic example of New Urbanism, but that a study done by the Heritage Foundation showed that its system of Urban Growth Boundaries had not succeeded in controlling sprawl, protecting farmland, reducing the cost of infrastructure or reducing traffic congestion through mass transit.

When John Fregonese and Gary Reddick (a Portland architect) made a presentation to the local American Institute of Architects chapter, they presented Portland as a model to follow.

Fregonese showed photos of the Pearl District area (which, according to the Heritage Foundation, is heavily subsidized by taxpayers) as an example of what Tulsa could be. He pointed out the light rail in the pictures, saying that people in parts of Portland that don't have light rail are begging for it. I don't doubt that a few people like it and want it, but both the Heritage Foundation study and the more recent CATO Institute study both indicate that light rail is used only by a very small fraction of the population, has done virtually nothing to eliminate traffic congestion and is extremely expensive to construct and operate.

According to the Heritage Foundation study, Portland has been a role model for another city, Atlanta, Georgia, but not because they particularly admire what Portland has done. This should be of interest to Tulsa, because both cities have had problems with air quality standards.

Because Atlanta did not meet federal standards for air quality under the Clean Air Act, the EPA forced Atlanta to take measures to clean up its air by withholding federal highway funding.

Angela M. Antonelli, the author of the chapter "Lessons from the Atlanta Experiment" in the Heritage Foundation study, stated that, "Although since 1995, state after state has been moving toward growth management policies designed to rein in development, what is unprecedented is the extent to which growth management efforts in Atlanta are being led by the federal government. Atlanta's recent experience reflects a chilling trend toward federal takeover of metropolitan regions, with unpredictable consequences for the freedom of the citizens to live and work as they choose."

Atlanta was forced by the federal government to come up with a comprehensive plan to show how they were going to solve their air quality problems. One of the components was light rail, which was offered to the federal government, not as a real solution to the problem, but as a way to get them to approve their plan.

Antonelli writes (in 2000), "Over the past two decades, Atlanta's effort to mitigate road congestion through use of light rail has been very expensive and largely unsuccessful... Yet, despite the billions the state has invested in public transportation in Atlanta over the past 20 years, only downtown Atlanta has direct, no-transfer service from throughout the area, and less than 10 percent of the metropolitan area is within walking distance of a rail station."

Despite their planning and improvements in air quality (probably due to cleaner tailpipe emissions), the federal government would not approve their plans and continued to withhold highway funds as the EPA enforced provisions of the Clean Air Act.

In 1998, the governor-elect told lawmakers that the only way to satisfy the EPA was to develop an (even larger) mass transit system that included buses, commuter rail and rapid rail. This led to the formation of the Georgia Regional Transportation Authority (GRTA). Antonelli writes, “The stunning speed with which the powerful GRTA was created was considered an unbelievable step in Georgia, where property rights and local land use control are so strong that county commissioners have been recalled just for advocating zoning.”

The law that created the GRTA also empowered the governor to appoint a 15-member board to “plan and coordinate all transportation and air quality projects in the 13 counties currently out of compliance...”. This board is able to veto the actions and plans of other state agencies and can legally stop any “major real estate development...that would affect traffic”, and can enforce its veto power by cutting off state and federal funds to “any jurisdiction that decides not to comply...”

The result? Moratoriums on construction that led businesses to locate just outside the 13-county area.

With the rare exception of very large cities like New York, light rail not only does not work, but it has become a means to manipulate development. In my opinion, light rail would not work in Tulsa, but we could easily see it become a part of our new comprehensive plan.

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Randy W. Bright, AIA, NCARB, is an architect who specializes in church and church-related projects. You may contact him at 918-664-7957, rwbrightchurcharch@sbcglobal.net or www.churcharchitect.net.

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