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## LIGHT RAIL: THE SLOWEST AND MOST COSTLIEST WAY TO MOVE PEOPLE

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As traffic congestion builds in Maryland urban areas, many people ask, "Why not relieve congestion by building light-rail lines like those built in San Diego, Denver, and Portland, Oregon?" Before Marylanders get too filled with light-rail envy and spend millions of taxpayer dollars, they should take a close look at the experiences of those other cities.

The most important lesson is that this nineteenth-century technology completely fails to meet the transportation needs of twenty-first-century cities. Costing as much to build as a four- to eight-lane freeway, the typical U.S. light-rail line carries fewer people than one-third of freeway lane — and most of those people would otherwise ride a bus. Thus, \$100 spent on light rail does less to relieve congestion than \$1 to \$4 spent on buses or road improvements.

**Does light rail reduce congestion?** No, it increases congestion whenever the rail lines occupy former street space and also because it is such an ineffective use of transport dollars. The Texas Transportation Institute reports that U.S. urban congestion is growing fastest in Portland, the Twin Cities, San Diego, and Boston — all areas emphasizing rail over highway transport. Congestion grew slowest in Houston, Phoenix, and other regions that emphasized road improvements instead of rail.

**Does light rail improve transit?** No, most cities that built light rail experienced a decline in transit's share of travel. This is partly because the expense of light rail forced transit agencies to increase fares and/or reduce bus services to areas not served by light rail. A Los Angeles bus rider's union successfully sued the regional transit agency for spending billions building rail into white suburbs while it let bus service to transit-dependent minority areas deteriorate.

**Is light rail more attractive to transit riders than buses?** No, transit riders are sensitive to frequencies and speed, and buses can run more frequently and faster than light rail.

- While most light-rail lines average just 20 miles per hour, many express bus routes average better than 30 miles per hour.
- While safety demands that light-rail vehicles be spaced several minutes apart, buses can run just seconds apart.

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When Portland voters rejected funding for more light rail, the local transit agency increased bus frequencies and speeds along the proposed rail route and increased ridership by 20 percent.

**Does light rail revitalize neighborhoods?** No. Ten years after Portland's light-rail line opened, city officials were dismayed to find none of the redevelopment they expected along the line. They now offer millions of dollars of tax waivers and other subsidies to attract developers to the area. Los Angeles, San Diego, and other cities have had similar experiences.

**Is light rail safe?** Far from it. Because they are so heavy, light-rail vehicles kill 11 people — mostly pedestrians — per billion passenger miles, while buses and urban freeways kill only about 4 per billion passenger miles.

**So why do so many cities want to build light rail?** One word: pork. The federal government gives cities billions of dollars to build useless rail lines. This creates a powerful lobby of interest groups to promote rail construction.

- If you hate automobiles and highways, you love light rail because every dollar spent on light rail is a dollar that can't be spent actually relieving congestion. You hope that the increased congestion will lead people to stop driving — although there is no evidence that it does.
- If you are the mayor of a big, slow-growing city, you love light rail because building light rail means spending federal transportation funds in your city instead of in the fast-growing suburbs where those funds are really needed.

- If you are a downtown property owner, you love light rail because most light-rail lines go downtown rather than to the suburban office parks and shopping malls that compete against you.

In short, light rail is simply one more way to divert taxpayer dollars away from where they are needed to where they primarily benefit wealthy elite's. In political campaigns where light rail has come before voters, the vast majority of contributions for light rail come from engineering firms, contractors, banks, and downtown business interests.

Subways and commuter rail transit work in cities with high-density urban cores, such as New York and Chicago. Yet even in dense regions light rail is not the answer: New Jersey's new Bergen-Hudson light-rail line is one of the biggest failures in the country.

Building light-rail lines costs more than the federal and local dollars wasted on these boondoggles. It also reduces urban livability by increasing congestion, reducing pedestrian safety, and promoting more corporate welfare such as tax breaks for developments along the light-rail lines. Marylanders who want to protect the livability of their communities should look for other solutions to transport problems.

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