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December 16, 2008

Can we avoid a Big Dig?

There is a way to avoid huge overruns on mega-projects, but policy makers won't like the medicine. It replaces dreams and pork with data.

By Knute Berger

With policy makers scrambling to make their projects "shovel ready" for Obama's new New Deal and with end-of-the-year decisions (supposedly) imminent on the multi-billion-dollar Alaskan Way Viaduct replacement options, it's worth it to revisit research on why large projects cost more than promised and deliver less. An article from earlier this year in *Miller-McCune* magazine, "Derailing the Boondoggle," provides some good guidelines for how to be a skeptical consumer of megaproject promises.

David Brewster mentioned this story when it first appeared in August because the magazine listed *Sound Transit* among eight international megaprojects (costing \$1 billion or more) that were major boondoggles. These are projects that cost way more than planned, often take longer than expected to complete, and have fewer benefits than pledged.

But the story wasn't simply about failure. It looks at the work of a Danish professor, *Bent Flyvbjerg*, who has become a world authority on such projects. He has made detailed studies of how they go wrong. Are there ways we can avoid a new Big Dig in Seattle?

Whether cost-overruns can be avoided is the first real question, and Flyvbjerg's research on this has gained international attention. Basically, the answer looking at history is: Usually not. The article reports that "[i]n a worldwide study of 258 rail, bridge and road projects over 70 years, Flyvbjerg found that nine of 10 went over budget. In another analysis, he showed that the average transit system carries less than half as many riders as preconstruction forecasts predicted."

Expanding on that work, Flyvbjerg began building a database on projects around the world to see what the patterns were:

A decade later, by collecting data from 20 nations on five continents, Flyvbjerg...produced the first statistically significant analysis to show [that] the vast majority of public works projects go drastically over budget and aren't as well patronized as proponents claim. He also found that modelers didn't seem to be improving their estimates over time; the scale of overruns remained relatively constant. Rail and highway projects are often the worst boondoggles, and they form the bulk of Flyvbjerg's research.

Why the flat learning curve? Why the repetition of error in project after project? Granted they are complicated, sometimes unique, but is there something else? Turns out, the perp is who you'd



The light-rail tunnel through Beacon Hill. (Sound Transit)

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Can we avoid a Big Dig?

first suspect: politicians, public officials, and the folks who work for them (and value their employment). Researchers have found that projects are victim of several forces. One is so called "optimism bias," which results when proponents get carried away with the vision and downplay the risks (insert picture of [Joel Horn](#) here). Politicians and public officials like to say "yes" rather than "no," but they have incentives to push ahead. It makes for good politics:

Local officials predict low costs and big benefits to persuade skeptical citizens and to compete with other local governments seeking federal funds. Flyvbjerg calls the result survival of the unfittest: Instead of approving the best projects, officials end up funding those that look best on paper. And by the time accurate figures rear their ugly head — and megaprojects routinely last longer than a decade, from conception to completion — the officials who launched them are long gone from office.

So the pols get maximum immediate benefit with little long-term exposure once the real bills start flowing in. By that time, there's a large hole in the ground that has to be filled.

Given such a climate, the article observes, planners are inclined to tell officials what they want to hear. Pessimists or skeptics get bounced from the payroll, or at best ignored, while everyone who is on board is rewarded with work, contracts, and jobs (that's the economic stimulus we keep hearing about). The bottom line, then, is that megaprojects go over budget and under perform because either their proponents are lying, what Flyvbjerg identifies as "strategic misrepresentation," or they're deluded by dreamy optimism where every hand is a straight flush.

The Green Line Monorail, the downtown Seattle bus tunnel, and Sound Transit have all given us a local look at this phenomenon. And beware the smaller but still expensive Mercer Mess fix, which consultants said would not improve congestion but has been embraced now by the City Council as an "urban renewal" project. It won't work as a transportation project, so the dreamers have quietly shifted the rationale. And how about the [Port of Seattle](#) with a staff that has demonstrably been willing to lie, break rules, and obfuscate to please the boss?

And talk about "optimism bias," the new New Deal is causing politicians to wrap everything in the banner of stimulus in a way that reflects all the self-deception Flyvbjerg says is par for the course. In essence, the New New Deal is itself the biggest of all megaprojects subject to the same dynamics. A kind of irrational exuberance seems to be at play. As [Peter Callaghan](#) notes in a skeptical column about it all in the *Tacoma News Tribune*, "Few politicians want to act as the killjoy, to toss the potato in the punch bowl...That is, should we solve a problem caused by too much borrowing by engaging in more borrowing?" Sounds like the classic Big Dig scenario.

\$201 million later, the Mercer Mess will still be a mess

Neither the City Council nor Mayor Greg Nickels seems to care that the Mercer Street Corridor project — realignment of the South Lake Union street grid — will do nothing to mitigate traffic between Seattle Center and Interstate 5. It will simply beautify a neighborhood virtually owned by Paul Allen.

The monorail dream: It's better left in Vegas

Mossback on the road: The Las Vegas Strip line once inspired boosters of the Seattle Monorail Project, but the Vegas system looks like it's crashing, too. Can showgirls save the day?

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Posted Tue, Dec 16, 8:38 a.m.

That's part of the solution - the other is real competition among suppliers. It's not a coincidence that local megaprojects are managed by the same folks who have rebuilt Iraq (for more on this see Naomi Klein's recent 'Shock Doctrine')

Government needs to insure there is a constant crop of new competitors - and this starts small - small

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projects and protecting sub-contractors from Prime contractor abuses. A crucial area for government is on the mid sized projects, making sure there are constant opportunities for a small organization to get mid-sized projects. One good way of doing this would be to replace minority set-asides with some sort of size and income based criteria.

Knute, your piece is right on track, save for one exception, the legal profession. Remember, our government is a system of checks and balances designed to protect individual rights. The legal systems vesting of those rights in the hands of Executives, Staff, and Legislators is sedition and corruption. We need a solution to THAT, short of citizens having their lives threatened by corrupt lawyers taking up arms. We don't have it, and your solution would not create it.

People who defraud the public need to go to jail - and there resources confiscated. That may well be all the 'stimulus' Seattle needs.

Here's some hard numbers. Nationwide foreclosures are running 1 in 500 homeowners. Nevada is highest at 1 in 76. Pierce County is highest in the State at 1 in 300 - King County is at 1 in 1100.

The numbers don't justify spending a dime of stimulus money in Seattle or the Eastside. South King might justify some - and perhaps the most shovel ready environmental friendly project is the completion of Sound Transit to Tacoma and Everett. Here in the south end, thanks to ST2, it is already funded to 272nd street - a large portion of the way.

Funding projects not ready to go runs the same risk we are now seeing with the Wall Street bailout - the very, very stupid rewarding of corrupt criminals. It is going to take more than number crunchers to solve that problem.

— Douglas Tooley

Posted Tue, Dec 16, 9:07 a.m.

It's worth noting that Sound Transit has had much more budget success in the past several years. They made their errors, then they had a shakeup and adopted new estimating practices, and now they're pretty damn good.

— mhays

Posted Tue, Dec 16, 10:05 a.m.

Although I'm saying the completion of the original ST system justifies stimulus funding, I still hold concerns about the financial ability - it could still be better.

Executive Director Joni Earl was the former finance manager at the Port of Seattle and recently enough to have been, at least, a part of the start of the problem. Personally, I've seen the results of the very well paid staff in building the Sounder South from the Tacoma Dome and it has not been money well spent, very, very definitely. Sound Transit is perhaps the best argument AGAINST the sort of number crunching Berger is proposing.

Documenting things to the hilt doesn't prevent fraud, and can even be a part of it. The 'documented' history of Sound Transit is definitely a case in point. Consider the cost examples of the sister agency Puget Sound Regional Council (boards historically have substantially overlapped) on the Eastside Rail. Tom Jones, a mid-sized engineering firm principle, claims his private group can do the project for half of the public estimate.

The completion of Sound Transit is shovel ready and, also, supports the transportation vision for downtown Seattle now emerging practically with the Viaduct and Mercer Mess proposals. The final point for me in supporting this project is the fact that it is regional, going into areas that are economically impacted while also strengthening our regionalism.

We all can be better, Sound Transit included. They won ST2 so, supporter or detractor of the ballot vote, it is important for every responsible citizen work to make it happen as best as possible and not undercut it with sick (and expensive) politics.

And who knows, perhaps a few Pierce County regional 'competitors' can teach Downtown Seattle business a thing or two....

— Douglas Tooley

Posted Tue, Dec 16, 11:10 a.m.

I'm a big supporter of Sound Transit. But the only parts that are shovel-ready are already happening or about to happen. ST2 needs years of study and design before it breaks ground.

I'm not sure if that's what you meant. But this country is full of people who think a conceptual design is all you need to build.

— mhays

Posted Tue, Dec 16, 11:32 a.m.

And the best way to get an "objective analysis" is to require that all large public works projects involve a thorough review by a team of outside experts who have no vested interest in the outcome and bring a range of professional experience to the table. Their contribution should be made in a very public process (open meetings with public input invited) that should start early and be on-going right up to the final decision. The members should represent a range of disciplines from economic analysis (cost/benefit), to the engineering/technology (e.g. transportation systems), to the social aspects (how the public is likely to respond with changes in behavior patterns to new infrastructure and other inputs, now and into the

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future. This may add an incremental cost to the project budget, but it will be money well spent.

– dn

Posted Tue, Dec 16, 11:38 a.m.

The ONLY way to avoid a big dig or equivalent is the RETROFIT the complete 2-mile long Viaduct. It can be accomplished in three years with no disruption of corridor businesses, employment, traffic volumes and for less than \$1 billion.

All other alternatives are bogus, lame, unjust, catastrophic and very unpredictable.

Do the right thing.

Imagine that the Viaduct is like a medieval wall around our great city. At each street crossing, we embellish the Viaduct that is visible from uphill, with a gateway both providing interesting point of entry to the waterfront as well as reflecting that part of the downtown. Each street gate becomes an artistic accomplishment to be experienced by all. That gateway can be expressed on the waterside as well announcing the neighborhood it connects to.

Quieter paving will drop the noise level by 50% and baffles will spread the sound so as to almost make it unnoticeable.

So, get over the need to get rid of it and make it into an urban design element of the city and the waterfront.

NOW!

Art

– arties4453

Posted Tue, Dec 16, 1:44 p.m.

I like the idea of dis-interested review board. But does it just layer on an additional pool of potential corruption? Because that's really what the study finds. No, it's not corruption in the sense that the governor of Illinois is corrupt. Rather it's the natural corruption of a system that ladles out huge amounts of money, with many potential recipients, based on political motivations (i.e. perceptual motivations) instead of more or less reality based needs.

So we have a situation where the viaduct, a valuable element in the economic health of the region, is broken. Now every stakeholder in the area with every motivation (environmental, property values, streetcar fetishist, urban designer, union workers, condo developer, commuter, bicycle activist, the list goes on) presents their individual vision of the potential fix, and the three main politicians (Mayor, King County Admin, and Gov) try to base their decisions on the relative political strengths of each stakeholder's ability to assist or block those politicians' re-election bids. (Would a Republican gov have a more free hand? Perhaps) In the end we will get some hybrid compromise (even if the damn thing falls down on its own first) that handles less traffic with more pollution, less accessibility to the waterfront with more pedestrian deaths, hampers the economic viability of the region while increasing a few property values, and makes at two thirds of those paying attention feel cheated.

And the rest wondering why you just can't get there from here.

– paddystclair

Posted Tue, Dec 16, 2:21 p.m.

Fact Check-

It has been pointed out to me that Joni Earl wasn't CFO at the Port. That's correct and I'm wrong, not for the first time. My recollection was that she worked for Maud Smith Daudon following in her footsteps at the port. Daudon was definitely Port CFO before becoming a deputy Mayor for Paul Schell.

I've been trying to remember my original source, but it would be nearly ten years now. FWIW, she got her start working as Deputy Executive for Snohomish County under Bob Drewel, current Executive Director at the PSRC.

– Douglas Tooley

Posted Tue, Dec 16, 3:16 p.m.

As the old saying goes, "the cost is the benefit." It will be really interesting to see what metrics the Obama administration uses to prioritize projects and make tradeoffs. I think I read Emil Jones, the guy who gave Obama a bunch of high profile wins in the Illinois legislature, said "that's not pork, it's steak." I personally am sick and tired of the indebtedness we're leaving our children. But I am not at all confident any new organization of project reviewers is going to be any more effective than the ones we have now.

By the way, supposedly the third runway got lots of objective reviews, including one from the Army Corps of Engineers. Col Ralph Graves signed off on it. Shortly thereafter, he went to work for Parsons Brinkerhoff - on the viaduct.

And guess who hired him away from PB?

The Port of Seattle. He has a very senior role in contracts administration.

Was there a quid pro quo or multiple quid pro quos? One wonders.

– sjenner

Posted Tue, Dec 16, 3:19 p.m.

I'm all for analytic and empirical approaches to predicting costs and likelihood of success for these kinds of projects. But as the article points out:

"Another [difficulty] is that finding comparable projects can be difficult because of scale, location, government structures, and many other factors make the apples-to-apples comparisons difficult."

For this and other reasons, there will always be a limit to what studies can tell us, and inevitably, it will always come down to a political battle between the optimists and pessimists. I'm usually with the optimists, because the potential cost of inaction or corner cutting is almost always greater than the tax dollars saved.

— Sean

Posted Tue, Dec 16, 7:51 p.m.



State transportation "guru" Aubrey Davis writes to make several points in response to this article. He says:

The Metro bus tunnel came in very close to budget and the miss was largely due to late breaking requirements from Seattle on additional police services to manage business access during construction. Second WSDOT projects collectively consistently come very close to the construction budget. The problem your article refers to is that early pre-engineering estimates are very often wrong for any of a wide range of reasons. We cannot take estimates seriously until engineering is at least 30% along. Unfortunately our political system requires getting legislative approval before the project is engineered because the money for engineering has to be appropriated and legislators want to know project cost at that time. Early numbers are rarely right.

One reason for WSDOT's record is the cost review system Doug MacDonald installed. He came to us after building a major water project to clean up Boston Harbor on time and on budget while the other Boston project was skyrocketing. Doug introduced an independent review process for major projects prior to final approval. Cost Estimating Review Process (CEVP) is an organized review by a special outside independent engineering review team which analyses risks...and makes estimates at various ranges of probabilities. (You can get a 60% probability number or a 90% number.) The Federal Highway Administration considers this an exemplary improvement in project cost estimating and it adds a lot of missing credibility to major project cost estimates here.

Sound Transit's early problem came from the fact that it was a brand new agency with no experience or culture and the temptation of the big budget led an inexperienced board and management to treat it as a Xmas tree. The engineering estimate were pretty close but the extras used up all contingency before they could get started. Joni Earl brought discipline and their 2000 budget is still being met.

— Knute Berger

Posted Tue, Dec 16, 11:01 p.m.

I get a real kick when Luddite carpet bombers like Skippy "Kirklandistan" Berger need to cut & paste an educated opinion to re-gain a sliver of credibility on this subject.

Frozen in time and space, the Lesser Seattle crank hopes modernity will start moving backwards some day; that way, Skippy "can get his city back.". To the glorious year of 1983, that is.

I wish the passive-aggressive aging hippy would just start being honest with us, and stop wasting our time with the same-old re-tread columns. Yes, we know inflation drives-up the costs of multi-billion dollar infrastructure projects (and yes, we know you consider 1974 to be the peak of those Boeing Bust 'glory years').

But why don't you just cough it up, Skipster? Tell people to get the hell out of your city...err, I mean, 'burb. After all, Skippy and Joni "BlueBlood" Balter have driving to do. Serious driving. Alone in their cars. Burning Dick Cheney's oil.

It's the lazy bullshlt populist's bread and butter. Super-stale bread and butter.

— MadisonAve

Posted Wed, Dec 17, 5:26 a.m.



"WSDOT projects collectively consistently come very close to the construction budget."

Do they now?

Or does DOT move the budget numbers around from quarter to quarter to align them with spending such that at the end of the project-day, the Department can claim they were "on budget?"

There is growing suspicion among transportation budget watchers that I know that something like this has happened with many of the Nickel Package (2003's five-cent increase in the gas tax) projects. Have the original, original, original budget numbers been "adjusted" so many times that you no longer can figure out what they are?

Somebody needs to develop a budgetary theory of relativity to explain how all this stuff works.

The Piper

— Scott St. Clair

Posted Wed, Dec 17, 8:01 a.m.

Can we avoid a Big Dig?

Piper--you can get historical info. about the transportation budget from the state Office of Financial Management and the legislative transportation committee staff. Should be no big mystery there, you just have to request the info. from the 2003 budget and from then on.

– Yarrow

Posted Wed, Dec 17, 8:11 a.m.

MadisonAve: I know Skip, and you obviously don't at all. For one, he doesn't live in Kirkland. And he's not a hippy. Hippies don't write columns about civic issues, hippies write articles for the Whole Earth Review about raising goats and legalizing hemp. As for whether Skip is a carpet-bombing Luddite who pines for the good old days of 1983 while hogging the road with his evil twin, Joni Balter--well, it's a hilarious image but I can see you're a comic writer and not a journalist. I like Skip's writing because it's everything your little screed is not--nuanced, reality-based, passionate, individualist without trying to be hip.

– Yarrow

Posted Wed, Dec 17, 8:15 a.m.



Yarrow,

Knock wood...an in depth investigation of WSDOT's Nickel Package efforts and the budgetary shell game it plays are on my list of journalistic to-dos for 2009

Thanks for the tip, however.

The Piper

– Scott St. Clair

Posted Wed, Dec 17, 10:21 a.m.

Another small example is the S.L.U.T. Originally, they forecast 2,500 riders per day in its first year, when they were trying to get the plan ok'd. Then, after construction started, they changed the forecast to 1,000 riders per day. So, now that they have a little over 1,000 riders per day, they can claim that the S.L.U.T. ridership beat the forecast. And they are actually trying to extend the streetcar system, even though the S.L.U.T. is an obvious waste of money.

ST is still lying all the time, but not so much about the cost any more (hopefully), but about the benefit.

ST still uses 200 riders per light rail car as the capacity, when the accepted capacity is 137.

ST still tries to claim they can run trains every 2 minutes, when everyone with knowledge of light rail systems knows that will never happen.

ST still tries to claim that light rail over the I-90 bridge will increase its capacity, when it will significantly decrease the capacity of the I-90 floating bridge.

ST was smart to have the vote on Prop 1 before the first segment opens, so the public can't see what the actual ridership and travel time to and from the airport will be.

However, light rail has taken on a life of its own. There is a large segment of the population here who apparently feel that "light rail is good", and "cars are bad", and for whom the cost and benefit of light rail are irrelevant -- you just build light rail because that is the "right thing to do."

How else can you explain people seeing the S.L.U.T. running around in circles empty all day and many people thinking its a great success?

What a waste.

– Lincoln

Posted Wed, Dec 17, 11:36 a.m.

Knute Berger claims in a comment above that Sound Transit's "2000 budget is still being met."

This is wrong on several levels, especially if the focus is on the Seattle light rail program, Sound Transit's centerpiece.

The Central Link Light Rail future construction budget through 2009 as certified by Sound Transit to the U.S. Government in the Full Funding Grant Agreement of January 2001 (revised from September 2000, and signed by the Clinton Administration in its last hours) was completely discredited by the U.S. DOT Inspector General's report of April 4, 2001. Federal funding was frozen for almost two years beginning on April 5, as documented at <http://www.dot.gov/affairs/dot03101.htm> and http://seattlepi.nwsourc.com/transportation/104639_sound17.shtml.

The light rail segment Sound Transit sought to build in that January 2001 budget, from 45th Street in the U District to Lander St. in SODO, was revealed in that IG report to be unattainable with Sound Transit's flow of authorized taxes.

Following the IG report, while Federal funding was frozen, the Sound Transit Board and staff in spring 2001 determined that the same budgeted resources that were insufficient to build light rail from 45th to Lander would be sufficient to build from Pine Street to Tukwila. Seattle Mayor Paul Schell was the first to propose this switch. It was a key strategic decision ... redirect the same budgeted money to a different light rail segment, first confirmed by the Board in June 2001.

The Sound Transit light rail funding story since that time is a twisting, twisted tale (see

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<http://www.bettertransport.info/pitf/ffgapending.htm>). The ending is not yet written, since the segment from Pine Street to Tukwila, called "Initial Segment," is not yet completed, fully tested, and in operation.

Construction is still underway under Beacon Hill. Just last week, less than a year before the planned opening in July 2009, millions of dollars were moved by the Sound Transit Board from budget contingency accounts to actual spending. Federal construction monitors are reporting monthly that the budget contingency is likely to be completely consumed.

The subsequent trackway add-ons to Initial Segment light rail -- the approximately one mile extension to the Airport, and the three mile extension to Husky Stadium -- were budget extensions as well, added to the year 2001 budget for Initial Segment. (This is likely the budget Knute Berger is meaning to refer to as "still being met.") The Sound Transit budget books on these light rail add on segments will not be closed on the Airport extension until 2010, and for UW Husky Stadium Link until 2017 (or later).

Sound Transit management and board leadership have over the years quietly moved both ends of the 1996 Sound Move light rail plan -- the north segment under the UW campus from Husky Stadium to 45th, and the two mile southern leg past the Airport to a parking lot at S200th -- into the phase 2 program that voters funded with the Prop 1 vote of last November 4th.

And speaking of Prop 1, Sound Transit achieving a 2008 doubling of its tax rate in the second year of its multi-billion dollar budget and schedule over-run on a 10 year light rail "test drive" program of 1996 before having the first paying customer is an emerging public administration classic.

Knute Berger is already polishing the myth by implying that it was planned down to the last dollar in year 2000!

Sounder commuter rail's budget, however, is a different can of worms. Train stations are being built in Pierce County that trains won't get to for years, since a connecting track is not yet funded!

– jniles

Posted Wed, Dec 17, 11:46 a.m.

If you want to get an idea where Lincoln is coming from: he spent several days ranting away on another forum, trying to convince his fellow Seattle-haters that bicycles should be banned from ALL city streets. The guy is a transportation sociopath. As in, he celebrates all the bad, self-centric personality disorders associated with experiencing "life" from behind the wheel of his car.

Yarrow: my apologies. I meant burned-out hippies. The worst of both worlds: a sense of naive dreaming, encapsulated by cynicism and regret. The doctrinaire '60s activist pit-bull approach; but rather than politics being the art of the possible, the burned-out hippy hopes and prays for the second coming of Charlie Chong, and stop modernity in its tracks. The new revolution of the old guard always starts out by looking backwards.

Berger goes on and on bltching about how everything is so screwed up, yet the guy rarely proposes an alternate path. Yep, floating bridges and rail projects are at risk for going over-budget. Tell us something we don't know. And tell us how Lesser Seattle would have done things "right".

Yarrow: this isn't a personal attack on Skip (it was on Joni Balter - I can't stand her). It's a critique of an old guard, which failed to adapt as change unfolded. Cities are all about dynamic movement. If you want to be mired in backwards tradition, head for the hills. And no, not Clyde Hill.

I happen to like Skip. I think he is a skilled writer and commentator. He also seems like a genuinely decent guy. Maybe that's why I get so frustrated with his dinosaur tendencies.

– MadisonAve

Posted Wed, Dec 17, 1:50 p.m.



To Jniles: Your beef is not with me. The reference to Sound Transit is part of a comment in response to the story that I posted for Aubrey Davis. They are his words, not mine. My name is at the bottom because I posted them on his behalf (he had trouble with Crosscut's system). Heaven forbid, I am not polishing Sound Transit's apple.

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– Knute Berger

Posted Wed, Dec 17, 2 p.m.



Skip Berger's piece, and the study it discusses, should not have roused so much intense reaction. What he wrote, and what the study affirms, is what everyone conversant with big public-works schemes has observed--- whether the projects be in Seattle, Boston, New York, or overseas.

The projects, often as not, do not flow from a rational examination of options. For instance, light rail did not evolve here from examination of relative costs and benefits of transportation systems which could move people and goods from one place to another regionally. It could not have done so because, by any measure, it is less cost-effective than bus transit systems. The latter move more people to more places for

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less money than light rail could do...without taking many years of construction to get rolling. Light rail, instead, flowed from the usual coalition of forces which rally behind big-ticket projects which can be beneficial to them. They got together, financed a ballot measure which made false promises about cost, time of construction, and ridership, and profited as a result. The billions involved are shared by light rail's sponsors and their economic satellites. The politicians supporting the scheme get paid off in campaign contributions in the thousands. A terrific bargain for the sponsors...billions of revenue for thousands in campaign money. Taxpayers pay for it.

There should be no shock in this. Big-project supporters--the contractors, the politicians, the bureaucrats, and others who want it--traditionally low ball the costs and exaggerate the public benefits. They know, going in, that taxpayers would never go for it if they knew the true costs and benefits.

The problem is particularly relevant here because decisions on such projects often are made via ballot measure rather than thru normal executive/legislative processes in which a governor, for instance, would propose the project and the Legislature would approve or reject it.

Citizens, of course, can resist such projects. But they, typically, are unorganized whereas the sponsors are not only organized but financed.

Still, they can be stopped if media give critical scrutiny to the projects and share their conclusions with the public. Where they do not--or, as here, often buy into the schemes, no matter how wasteful--the projects go forward. Our only real option, then, is to throw out of office after the fact the elected officials we believe to have created these tax-eating boondoggles. But, as was noted in the article, the officials often as not have left the house before the fat lady sings. No real substitute for paying attention and stopping dumb stuff before it happens. Not many people take the trouble to pay that kind of attention.

— Ted Van Dyk

Posted Wed, Dec 17, 7:59 p.m.

MadisonAve: Well, I'm glad we cleared that up--you didn't mean to insult Skip by calling him a cynical burned-out hippy from Kirkland (!)--(which I take it is a bad town to be associated with?) But seriously, it sounds like his writing pisses you off and you have some things to say on the subject yourself, which I hope I'll get to read some time.

— Yarrow

Posted Thu, Dec 18, 9:45 a.m.

To Knute Berger, and Aubrey Davis:

Sorry about the misattribution in my comment above of Dec. 17, 11:36 am.

Knute's computer-generated "signature" at the bottom of the comment he entered Dec. 16, 7:51 pm, fooled me into imagining that I was looking at paraphrasing, and that the voice had changed by the bottom of the mini-essay I was seeing.

Note to Crosscut editors: Search and replace "Knute Berger" with "Aubrey Davis" in my comment.

— jniles

Posted Fri, Dec 19, 10:53 a.m.

Aubrey Davis, I believe 90, is one of this region's finest leaders - an early CEO at Group Health his business perspective is very, very health.

He does get caught up in fighting the battles of his era, but not to the point of corruption as with others of his era.

Case in point is the Joni Earl era at ST. My active monitoring of the agency had ended not long before she came on board - recall that this was the era of Charlie Chong and the Seattle Commons. It was my perception that the fiscal scandal was mostly a PR thing with a scapegoat, Bob White and the responsibility for the problems lay with the friends of Bob Drewel, Earl's former boss.

I don't have the numbers at hand, but the Sounder in Pierce County, something I've just started to actively monitor, is definitely way over budget.

— Douglas Tooley

Posted Fri, Dec 19, 4:13 p.m.

I wonder what countries have been most successful in (1) TRULY identifying crucial infrastructure needs (2) developing projects that truly meet regional needs EFFECTIVELY.

Although we would like planning to be a rational process, it is often very fadish - driven by what's the next cool thing (stadiums, light rail) rather than what is really needed (upgraded water piping and sewage systems, improved and greatly expanded bus service). Reasonable people can disagree but it seems to me that many of these projects lack a robust feasibility stage where alternatives are honestly and vigorously compared and debated.

America no longer has the financial resources it once did, we really have to be so much more judicious in the projects we undertake - it has direct impact on the liveability and economic competitiveness of our country.

— bjorn

Posted Mon, Dec 22, 10:12 a.m.

I have to agree with MadisonAve, without all the name calling.

I do agree that Berger reminds me a lot of "Lesser Seattle" proponent extraordinaire Emmett Watson. Emmett was both a bit more curmudgeonly and erudite in his columns.

It is classic Knute Berger to write a 1000-2000 word column with a lot of vilifying of [Fill In the Blank: Government, Political, Civic, Business, Labor, Nonprofit, Advocacy Group] Leaders, and then Knute, being by far the smartest guy in the room, comes up with some flip solution that no one has ever thought of before, such as in this article "RELY ON THE DATA"!!! And of course, due to space limitations, said smartest guy in the room has no more room to explain exactly what he means.

Gee whiz, thanks Knute, "rely on the data", that is brilliant! Hopefully those evil, corrupt, tax-sucking folks at Sound Transit, WasDOT, the Port and other agencies are students of your columns. You've cleared up everything for us! Would you care to elaborate for once?

— Haida_Bear

Posted Wed, Dec 24, 4:58 p.m.

Let's look at what we can learn from the real "Big Dig," that is, the original highway tunneling project through downtown Boston, replacing an elevated highway called The Central Artery.

Billions were spent, more billions than expected, but does traffic in Boston flow better now that the decades long mega-project is completed?

First reports, based on a comprehensive independent study unconnected to the project sponsors, were positive:

This is from a celebration of the project in a long essay by Dan Baxter in the June 2007 issue of *Roads & Bridges* magazine:

An independent study, "Economic Impacts of the Massachusetts Turnpike Authority and the Central Artery/Third Harbor Tunnel Project, performed by the Boston-based international transportation and economics consulting group EDR, stated that 'the original 1990 environmental projection was that the 'Big Dig' would improve traffic flow by 40% by 2010. Today, the project exceeds that with a 62% improvement in traffic flow. This was accomplished while overall traffic volume grew by 23.5% since 1995.'"

See <http://www.roadsbridges.com/Big-believer-article8232> for the entire retrospective, which notes that the Big Dig does not today (as of 2007) show a reasonable cost-to-benefit ratio unless real estate gains are also included on the benefits side.

That's the good news. Next, here is some bad news, now dribbling out, beginning with field reports from many commuters who are finding that driving through downtown Boston is a breeze, but commuting to or from downtown Boston is now taking longer.

The *Boston Globe* recently reported on the results of measurements taken by government officials in a story by Sean Murphy, "Big Dig pushes bottlenecks outward: Artery has cleared, but commutes longer on several major routes" published November 16, 2008.

Here are the lead paragraphs in that story:

"A Globe analysis of state highway data documents what many motorists have come to realize since the new Central Artery tunnels were completed: While the Big Dig achieved its goal of freeing up highway traffic downtown, the bottlenecks were only pushed outward, as more drivers jockey for the limited space on the major commuting routes.

"Ultimately, many motorists going to and from the suburbs at peak rush hours are spending more time stuck in traffic, not less. The phenomenon is a result of a surge in drivers crowding onto highways - an ironic byproduct of the Big Dig's success in clearing away downtown traffic jams."

A potential lesson for our region is to make sure that our official transportation network planners at PSRC and WSDOT use their best forecasting tools to spot likely "ironic byproducts" of pending megaproject investments. In addition to the Alaskan Way Viaduct, pending megaprojects include the multi-modal Lake Washington crossing situation on two bridges for cars, trucks, buses, and trains.

Fresh billions are now available for the I-90 bridge via Sound Transit's doubled revenue stream to add new transit customers at a million dollars each (per the East Link draft EIS now being circulated), but at the same time the region is billions short on replacing a worn-out SR 520. To the complex mix is added the prospect of road user fees, aka tolling.

What's going on in Boston area with roads, trains, buses, and trucks following considerable historical road and transit investments (a subway long in place, lots of light rail too, plus a beltway, and even an outer beltway) provides useful input for thinking more deeply, planning more wisely, about what our region is trying to do with not one, not two, not three, but at least four Big Digs pending.

— jniles

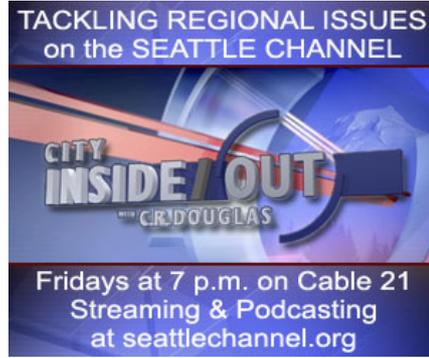
Posted Wed, Dec 24, 5:03 p.m.

The *Boston Globe* story I quoted from in the previous comment is at http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2008/11/16/big_dig_pushes_bottlenecks_outward/ .

— jniles

02-01-2009

Can we avoid a Big Dig?



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