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Trains and Parking: Time to Check True Costs?

Neal Peirce



WASHINGTON -- New and expanded train systems, or just more parking spaces? Which should Americans pay for?

Separate pieces of research uncorked last week -- both, ironically, from the normally calm and consensual American Planning Association (APA) -- point us in diametrically opposite directions.

One finding: trains are oversold. A study in APA's journal claims official forecasts of how many passengers will actually ride new urban or intercity rail systems "are highly, systematically, and significantly misleading (inflated)," thus costing governments "billions" more than predicted.

Based on the record of 27 rail projects across 14 countries between 1969 and 1998 -- eight of them in the United States, including San Francisco's BART and the Metro systems in Washington, Portland, Sacramento and Baltimore -- the study found that actual first-year ridership was overestimated by an astounding 106 percent.

"Rail builders cheat taxpayers with false revenue forecasts," the chief researcher, Bent Flyvbjerg of Aalborg University in Denmark asserted in a press release from his university, independent of APA. There's "a decades-long scam," he said, in which "rail promoters manipulate the benefit-cost analyses that are used to decide on funding."

His study, Flyvbjerg predicated, would be "a bombshell for the new transportation bill, currently working its way through Congress" with \$52 billion earmarked for mass transit alone. Such "rail schemes" as the Second Avenue Subway in New York, light rail to Dulles Airport outside Washington, D.C., light rail in Charlotte, Dallas, Houston, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Phoenix and Seattle, he contended, "are highly likely to turn into financial disasters unless better governance is established."

APA leaders recoiled at Flyvbjerg's press release comments, insisting the claims and language weren't authorized by the APA, or justified by the research. Still, it was clear Flyvbjerg's words could be red meat for enemies of public transportation. And that they would prompt counterattacks by rail proponents.

Indeed, when I checked the conclusions with Thomas M. Downs, former Amtrak CEO, New Jersey commissioner of transportation and now president of the Eno Transportation Foundation, he condemned both Flyvbjerg's study methods and conclusions.

Most of the U.S. rail projects included in the study, Downs noted, are yesteryear's news, dating back to the 1970s and early '80s. By contrast, he said, ridership on several more recent projects -- Houston, Denver, St. Louis and Minneapolis, for example -- have actually exceeded projections.

Plus, said Downs, cutting the ribbon for a rail project is different from a new highway (that cars just drive onto). First-year rail ridership is often low because only starter segments are included and it takes a while to iron bugs out of new rail cars and control systems.

Plus, Downs maintains, "to assert rail planners across the globe are intentionally lying, and have been doing so for 30 years, is just hot air."

Intriguingly, while one APA message hits trains, another trashes a big feature of the car culture: parking. Last week APA also published "The High Cost of Free Parking," by Donald Shoup, a UCLA professor of urban planning. Shoup reports we're paying a massive annual subsidy for parking --

indeed between \$127 billion and \$374 billion in 2002, as much as we spent on Medicare or national defense that year.

The parking we think is "free" really isn't -- it's built into the cost of every house or apartment we buy our rent, every purchase we make in a store, every restaurant meal or movie. Why? Because of rigid off-street parking requirements, mostly copied blindly in codes from city to city, or based on national surveys of peak demand at suburban sites devoid of public transit or pedestrian amenities.

What's more, parking is built into taxes we pay because cities and towns provide vast amounts of totally "free" parking, or metered parking at a fraction of market rates in commercial garages.

And everyone ends up paying all the inflated costs and taxes -- whether they drive or not. Plus: parking gobbles up space and makes walking perilous or impractical, feeding sprawl. Buffalo and Albuquerque, for example, devote more downtown land to parking than all other land uses combined. Overall, America is not far short of *1 billion* parking spots.

The cure? Shoup would remove all zoning requirements for off-street parking -- let the market dictate choices.

Second, he would increase curb-parking fees to fair market prices, thus discouraging the cruising for parking spaces that fouls the air and helps congest city traffic.

And finally, he'd minimize the predictable political backlash by earmarking the dramatically increased street parking fees to clean and light streets, repair sidewalks, remove graffiti, plant trees, preserve historic buildings and put utility wires underground.

At least this second APA message sounds like a win-win strategy, not just for motorists the moment they get out of their cars, but for the routinely ignored millions of Americans too young or old, unable or unwilling to drive -- yet still hearing, in many cities, that rail transit is an oversold frill.

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