

A synopsis of
Great Rail Disasters

Impact Of Rail Transit On Urban Livability

A new publication from Texas Public Policy Foundation by Randal O'Toole

The stampede to plan and build rail transit lines in American cities has led to a series of financial and mobility disasters. They are financial disasters because rail projects spend billions of taxpayers' dollars and produce little in return. They are mobility disasters because rail transit almost always increases regional congestion and usually reduces transit's share of commuting and general travel.

Rail transit has proven an inefficient means of transporting people. Twenty-three of the nation's 50 largest urban areas had rail transit in 2000. In the 23 regions with rail, half lost transit commuters and per capita transit rides declined. *Transit's share of total travel declined in a majority of rail regions.*

Rail transit is expensive. It usually costs more to build and often costs more to operate than originally projected. To pay for cost overruns, transit agencies often must boost transit fares or cut transit service outside of rail corridors. Thus, *rail transit tends to harm most transit users.* Rail transit also harms most auto drivers. Most regions building rail transit expect to spend half to four-fifths of their transportation capital budgets on transit systems that carry 0.5 to 4 percent of passenger travel. This imbalanced funding makes it impossible to remove highway bottlenecks and leads to growing congestion.

Rail's high cost makes it ineffective at reducing congestion. On average, \$13 spent on rail transit is less effective at reducing congestion than \$1 spent on freeway improvements. *Investments in rail transit are only about half as effective as investments in bus transit.*

Rail transit also tends to be more dangerous than other forms of travel. Interstate freeways cause 3.9 deaths per billion passenger miles. Accidents on urban roads and streets in general lead to about 6.8 deaths per billion passenger miles. Bus travel is one of the safest forms of transport with only 4.3 deaths per billion passenger miles. However, heavy rail averages 5.0, commuter rail 11.3, and light rail 14.8 deaths per billion passenger miles.

Rail contributes little to improve the environment or conserve energy. The average *light rail line consumes more energy per passenger mile than passenger cars.* While some commuter and heavy rail transit operations use a little less energy per passenger mile than cars, energy consumed to construct rail lines can more than make up for this savings. Nor is rail transit

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an effective way to clean the air. Even where rail transit has attracted new transit riders out of their cars, rail transit costs roughly \$1 million per ton of air pollution eliminated. Many other techniques to clean the air cost less than \$10,000 per ton.

Rail transit has enthusiasts, nevertheless. Riders are attracted by rail's high speed and fewer stops than bus transit. For many, rail transit's incredible expense is its main attraction. Auto-haters love rail transit because it consumes funds that could otherwise be spent reducing congestion. Politicians love rail transit because the companies that will profit from it are a source of campaign contributions. Transit agencies love rail transit because it boosts their budgets and national prestige.

But the public should not be fooled: rail transit is a great disaster.

An evaluation of rail transit in Dallas-Fort Worth and 22 other cities is provided in *Great Rail Disasters: The Impact Of Rail Transit On Urban Livability*. Written by Randal O'Toole, it was originally produced in collaboration with the Independence Institute.

**This report is available online at
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