

Potential for Light Rail Transit: Federal Perspective

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The fact that UMTA is sponsoring a conference on light rail transit in this new era of federal domestic budgetary restraint is indicative of our interest in and support for the light rail alternative. We believe now, just as we did in 1975 when we sponsored the first of these conferences, that a special effort is warranted and necessary to present the light rail transit option to government officials, planners, engineers, architects, private sector developers, the academic community, and transit operators.

At the same time, however, we must be realistic. Light rail transit is not a panacea, nor is it the ideal solution for meeting all of our urban mobility needs. There is no unimodal approach; no single transit system of any technology can effectively serve the broad range of travel patterns and service requirements in our nation's cities. But light rail transit is an increasingly attractive alternative, an alternative that will figure even more prominently in future consideration of the various transit options available to local communities.

We have enlisted the federal government's mass transportation assistance program in this administration's fight against inflation. Consistent with our electoral mandate and our determination to hold down federal spending, UMTA will not be funding new transit starts until the nation's economy improves. This decision to postpone new starts is in no way a judgment of the obvious merits of various projects now on the drawing boards. Rather, it is a pragmatic expression of a realistic attitude about what the federal government can and cannot afford. Those who argue to the contrary are deceiving themselves and perpetrating a cruel hoax by raising unwarranted expectations about the outlook for the future.

The domestic budgetary restraint that has thus far characterized the Reagan administration's approach to federal spending will transcend this administration. Clearly, there is transregional, bipartisan support for balanced federal budgets—not just in the Congress, but among the voters as well. This new political and economic fact of life will result in even greater demand for cost-effective, flexible approaches to meeting local transit needs; Uncle Sam simply will not be able to assume the enormous financial burdens inherent to the development of new multi-billion-dollar, state-of-the-art rapid rail transit systems.

That is why the light rail transit alternative is so important. It is a transit option that we believe local communities can pursue without a massive commitment of federal dollars. And it is a transit alternative that local communities must carefully consider as they review the approaches available to meet unique local transit needs.

Unfortunately, consideration and application of light rail transit has been limited by the unfounded perception that urban transit options are limited to bus or heavy rail. A concerted effort to educate policymakers and the public is therefore essential to the further development and deployment of this transit option. We need look no further than San Diego for a testament to what can be accomplished when imaginative leadership and community resources are applied to meet local transit needs.

The San Diego Trolley was built with virtually no

federal funds. It has no massive, marble monument to transit stations, no over-engineered, technologically mind-boggling designs, no astronomical cost overruns. Instead, it is an effective, no-frills approach to this area's unique transportation needs.

Obviously, what worked for San Diego may not necessarily be appropriate for other cities. However, the San Diego experience has demonstrated how attractive the light rail transit alternative can be, especially in light of the new federal domestic spending environment.

In those areas where public transportation needs are urgent, light rail transit is a good candidate for early development. The basic technology for light rail transit is in place—it has been in use for years. In fact, worldwide light rail transit is the most extensively used fixed guideway transit mode. As a result, the extensive, expensive, and time-consuming research, development, and demonstration process necessary for the introduction of new transit modes or technology is simply not needed for the practical application of light rail transit.

But this is only one of the features that makes this transit mode so attractive. Light rail transit also has incomparable flexibility. It can be adapted to a wide variety of geographic and topographic conditions, financial capabilities, rights-of-way, and existing transit infrastructures. Moreover, light rail transit can be developed incrementally; it can be expanded as demand and the ability to pay for it are increased. This incremental feature of light rail transit is especially important in view of the new public sector financial realities. Finally, light rail transit is simply much less costly than conventional rail transit. It does not have the overall high performance and capacity requirements of conventional rapid transit; consequently, construction and operating costs are lower. This lower cost makes light rail transit economically justifiable in urban areas where conventional rapid transit is not feasible because of cost or demand factors.

Light rail transit is the transit option of the future. The technology is in place, it is flexible, it can be developed incrementally, and it is less expensive than conventional rapid transit. The key to more extensive deployment is our willingness and ability to spread the message of its virtues.

In an address to the first light rail transit conference, UMTA's view of the light rail transit alternative was presented:

It is UMTA's policy to leave to local communities the widest possible discretion in deciding how they should meet their transportation needs and what should be the nature and mix of their transportation services. Thus, in the final analysis, the planners, engineers, transit operators, local elected officials, public interest groups, the press, and concerned citizens ultimately will decide whether LRT should become a major force in the transportation systems of American cities.

This is as relevant today as it was in 1975.