

URBAN RAIL TRANSIT SYSTEMS

Introduction

Transportation has always involved a measure of controversy. However, conflicts appear to be on the rise as the nation becomes more crowded and we become more concerned not only about the efficient movement of people and goods, but also about energy, safety, the environment, economic development, and urban problems. One example is the intense battle being waged in the media over larger combination trucks. Another centers on the need for additional highway capacity in urban areas, with conflicting claims about the implications for air quality. New fuel economy standards for American automobiles and the potential for high-speed, magnetically levitated (maglev) trains are yet other simmering controversies.

The differing positions in these disputes are often hard to understand for those not directly involved, especially because both sides of the technical arguments are seldom published together. Further contributing to the confusion, all sides claim that objective research and analysis support their views.

The relative merits of new rail systems for America's cities, although not a new issue, appears to be another dispute of growing importance, considering the role of transit in improving air quality. A particular aspect of this disagreement surrounds the performance of the U.S. urban rail systems built in recent years. To help understand the issue, this edition of *TR News* presents the arguments of four transportation experts in the following pages. Two of the points of view are critical of preconstruction ridership and cost estimates for recently built systems, claiming that the projections appear biased in favor of a decision to build these systems. The other two defend the projections and the need for new urban rail systems.

It is unusual for *TR News* to deal directly with controversial matters such as this, but allowing the authors to make their cases side by side may make it easier for readers to understand the issues involved and make their own judgments. We invite your views on the substance of this particular controversy, as well as on whether *TR News* is an appropriate forum for such a discussion.



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