

Let's not get sidetracked by light-rail fad

Editorial By Nicholas Dagen Bloom

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Light rail is red hot in New Orleans.

A panel early this spring of local grandees at Tulane — people with power and money — agreed that what New Orleans needs is a “light” rail system with fancy cars, fixed routes and federal cash. The projected line would run from the airport to downtown and New Orleans East. The executive director of the Regional Planning Commission, Walter Brooks, spoke passionately in favor of rail, so we won't have to wait long for ambitious proposals.

But hold on. Is our light rail experience going to be different from that of other cities?

Cities like Baltimore and St. Louis have produced unimpressive rail systems, with rarely more than a few cars running at rush hour and on game days.

Worse, these lines mainly serve affluent suburban areas. The only city in America with a truly popular light rail system is that planners' paradise, Portland, Ore., but that city has carefully developed a bus system — a clean, fast, citywide network — that supports rail.

Its bus system is the real star of



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Point of View

their city, although you'd never know it when the planners come back from their jaunts to Portland all hot and bothered for rail.

Our existing “light rail” system, the St. Charles and Riverfront streetcars, is too slow and irregular for most commuters and functions primarily as a theme ride for tipsy

conventioners. The new Canal Street line will likely add another slow and enjoyable ride for our visitors.

Again, federal money made this expansion possible, but better bus service would likely have done just as much for less money and fewer construction headaches.

So why the light rail frenzy?

Federal money beckons once again, although it has only been a year since the embarrassing Maglev meltdown.

Not even usually gullible federal officials were willing to sit still for the grossly inflated rider numbers cooked up by overpaid planning consultants.

Only serious competition killed that boondoggle. The 60,000 or so transit-hungry auto commuters from St. Tammany Parish will just have to find another mass transit option.

Sorry, guys.

Luckily, light rail systems are rarely as closely scrutinized by federal officials. Our odds are much better this time.

The other light rail attraction is the siren song of “regionalism.”

Light rail is thought to be acceptable to both suburbanites and city dwellers. Most suburbanites won't get on a bus but say they will ride a train; urban residents are thought to ride either buses or trains out of desperation.

The perfect solution: Build trains and both will ride. Or will they?

I doubt suburbanites or many urbanites not currently using mass transit will exchange a 10-minute drive for an hour on a train. Would you?

Here are some more modest solutions that responsible politicians and planners should advocate. The RTA and regional authorities should demonstrate that they are serious about current ridership before building fancy train sets.

► Reduce headways (times between buses) on popular routes — waiting more than five or 10 minutes in New Orleans is torture. Portland's bus system works because during rush hours the most popular routes have a bus stopping every five minutes or so. Paradise!

► Better advertise the existing transit system, install clear route signs, and make schedules available to the public.

I won't bore you with the difficulties of trying to buy a pass or find schedules in this town. An RTA store on Canal would help.

► Install seating and shaded shelters at bus stops. No need to make even greater sacrifices for riding transit.
► Authorize more private van services in the city. These can take people where they want to go very quickly — like our airport shuttles — with almost no cost to the city.

Pick-up points could be designated downtown and in the suburbs. Imagine a Target, Home Depot or Lakeside Shopping Center van line.

► Experiment with free days, monthly pass giveaways and frequent user rewards.

All of these improvements may lead to only modest increases in ridership, but they will definitely improve the transit experience for the transit rider.

These reforms would also demonstrate the RTA's relative ability to run an expensive and complex new transit system. We should not forget the current, dedicated customers in the rush for the phantom light rail riders of tomorrow.

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