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SECOND OPINION

Rail planners spin a tale of rising ridership

By Cliff Slater

For their latest effort at spin, Parsons Brinckerhoff (PB) last week provided the public with the ridership forecast for rail transit. PB says that rail transit will increase total public transportation ridership by 70 percent over the next 25 years, or nearly three times the projected 27 percent gain in population.[i]

This is not credible and here's why:

There are no urban areas that have put in rail systems in modern times and increased public transportation ridership greater than the growth of population — let alone three times.

Review the U.S. Census data for those metro areas that put rail lines in during the 1980-2000 period.[ii] You will find that of all the metro areas with rail, only San Diego managed to even maintain the same growth in transit commuters as population. All other metro areas had less growth in transit commuters than population. A third of these metro areas had absolute declines in transit commuters.

Let's come at this rail forecast another way.

As part of the 1992 rail transit process, PB forecast that the then daily bus ridership of 206,500 would increase to 249,000 in 2005 even if we did nothing. (July 1992 forecast, p. 4-10)

Then in 2003, during the Bus/Rapid transit process, PB forecast that the then daily bus ridership of 186,000 would increase to 261,000 in 2025 even if we did nothing. (July 2003 forecast, pp. 4-10 & 15.)

Now in 2006, PB forecasts that today's daily bus ridership of 180,000 will increase to 235,000 in 2030 even if we do nothing.[iii]

Note that a) all the above numbers are PB's, not mine, and b) the actual bus ridership has steadily declined since 1992, and c) PB continues to forecast increases of 30 percent without ever explaining the drop in bus ridership.

The real significance of these 'do nothing' bus forecasts is that the same assumptions and computer models used for them are the same as those used to produce the rail transit forecast. Therefore, to find the latest rail transit forecast credible you would have to find the No-build forecasts credible. Unless you are unable to recognize *shibai* when it faces you, this is unlikely.

The other statement that PB made about the projections was, "rail transit can ease traffic because it's the only one of the major options that pulls cars out of the mix."

You have to parse PB's sentences to get at their meaning since this statement does not say what it appears to say. They did not say that *only* rail transit can ease traffic; they said that it is the only one to pull cars "out of the mix," whatever that means.

And when they say "ease traffic" we know from their earlier statement what that means, it is that "by 2030 a rail transit line *could* ease traffic congestion by 10 percent overall … By then, however, traffic congestion will likely worsen since 30 percent more people are projected to be on the island."

In other words, even if PB's forecast is right (as we can see, there is no chance of that), traffic congestion will still be far worse than today even if they were to build the rail transit line.

However, there is the HOT lanes option.

We now have about 17,000 vehicles per peak hour coming into town from the far end of the Leeward Corridor.[iv] Were we to build elevated three-lane reversible HOT lanes, that would remove about 5,500 vehicles per hour from the regular freeways, or at least 30 percent of the current traffic. That is triple the impact on traffic congestion than the effect that PB says rail transit would have.[v]

That would ease the traffic quite considerably and mean that it would take 25 years to get back to current traffic congestion levels — and that's only if we do not build any additional HOT lanes.

And this calculation does not take into account that buses and vanpools running on uncongested HOT lanes at 60 mph, no long stuck in traffic, would greatly encourage some motorists to change to using express buses since the HOT lanes would reduce bus travel time by about 20 minutes.

With Mayor Hanneman, PB officials, a majority of the City Council, all spinning away with their pro-rail statements, how can we possibly expect fair treatment for the HOT lanes alternative?

Cliff Slater is a regular columnist whose footnoted columns are at: www.cliffslater.com

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Footnotes:

[i] http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/2006/Sep/15/ln/FP609150342.html. Page 3 of the Draft Oahu Regional Transit Plan a foundation document for the rail plan calls for a 240,000 gain in residents 2005 to 2030. The State Data Book, Table 1.06, shows 2005 residents as 905,000. The gain projected is therefore is 26.5 percent.

[ii]

Commuter use of public transportation in metro areas with rail, 1980-2000

Metro Area (MSA)	% change transit use	% change commuters
New York	8.9%	14.6%
Los Angeles	20.3%	30.5%
Chicago	-16.3%	18.0%
Washington, DC	4.6%	39.1%
San Francisco	13.6%	33.9%
Philadelphia	-15.8%	20.0%
Boston	12.3%	17.3%
Atlanta	5.4%	99.5%
Miami	13.7%	42.8%
Cleveland	-50.5%	10.7%

San Diego	56.7%	52.1%
St. Louis	-48.3%	20.7%
Pittsburgh	-38.3%	3.6%
Portland	24.2%	56.9%
Sacramento	34.4%	69.3%
Buffalo	-44.9%	4.0%

Source: *Journey to Work Trends in the United States and its Major Metropolitan Areas 1960 – 2000*. Federal Highway Administration publication No. FHWA -EP-03-058. Table 4.13. Available at: http://www.fhwa.dot.gov/ctpp/jtw/

[iii] http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/2006/Sep/15/ln/FP609150342.html.

[iv] 2003 FEIS for the BRT program. Table 1.2-9.

[v] http://the.honoluluadvertiser.com/article/2006/Sep/15/ln/FP609150342.html. First paragraph.