



**SECOND OPINION**

## Other cities have shown rail does not work

By Cliff Slater

On Thursday, Mayor Hanneman held a Transit Symposium to help shore up his faltering faithful. On hand were the former mayors of Phoenix and Houston, spokespeople for Vancouver, Dallas, San Jose and Salt Lake City together with assorted purveyors of rail transit vehicles and, of course, the city consultants, Parsons Brinckerhoff.

To listen to these folks you would think that rail transit did everything but cure the common cold. However, to get past all the spin, we need to get to the root of what they really did not talk about — relieving traffic congestion.

For that you need to understand the 8/80 principle. It will show you why there are massive increases in traffic congestion in all the cities represented by the speakers at the Symposium.

Here are the four points of the 8/80 principle:

1. As of the 2000 Census, Honolulu had 8 percent of commuters using transit and 80 percent drove — hence the 8/80.
2. No metro area in the U.S. during the 1980-2000 period increased the percentage of commuters using public transportation — not one.
3. If the percentages stay the same, of our next 100,000 new commuters, 8,000 will use transit and 80,000 will drive. Since we are not planning any new major highways, congestion will be much worse than today.
4. The same general result will obtain anywhere that population growth is significant and transit usage is very small relative to automobile use. The numbers may vary slightly, but the principle holds.

Stop here. Read the above again and swirl it around your brain until the penny drops — then you will see why public transportation can never relieve traffic congestion.

A perfect example is Dallas/Fort Worth, one of the five “success stories”<sup>i</sup> the Mayor will be touting at the Symposium. It is the only one of the five that was built in the 1990s. This allows us to check the change in their commuter ridership between the 1990 and 2000 U.S. Census data.<sup>ii</sup>

In 1990, just 2.3 percent of Dallas commuters used transit. In 1996, they opened a multi-million dollar light rail transit line and by the next Census four years later they had reduced — not increased — the number of commuters, as well as the percentage of those using public transportation. This occurred despite opening the rail line and having a significant population increase. The result: 388,000 more people commuted by car and Dallas had a huge increase in traffic congestion in the nation, according to the Texas Transportation Institute.<sup>iii</sup>

Bleak outlook: If Dallas can maintain their 1.8 percent of commuters using public transportation, it means that of the 740,000 new commuters they forecast in ten years,<sup>iv</sup> 13,000 will use transit and 560,000 will drive. This is the 8/80 principle at work.

While they were not represented at the Symposium, two other metro areas opened rail lines in the 1990s, Denver and St. Louis. Same story. Between the 1990 and 2000 Census takings, St. Louis

had 93,000 more people using cars while 4,000 fewer commuters used transit. Denver gained 240,000 more commuters in automobiles and just 17,000 more people using transit.

Another metro area the mayor will tout is Vancouver, Canada. While not in the U.S. Census, we can use Vancouver's own data. According to the Greater Vancouver Transportation Authority (GVTA), their public transportation in 2003 handled 11 percent of commuters,<sup>v</sup> with 74 percent of commuters using automobiles. This situation has been stable since 1993. Employment growth was 37 percent during this time.<sup>vi</sup>

The outcome, during this ten-year period, was an increase of 218,000 commuters using autos and 32,000 commuters using transit and, of course, without new highways congestion became a major problem.<sup>vii</sup>

The GVTA forecasts that over the next ten years, employment will increase by 400,000 and transit's market share will increase from 11 to 13 percent.

If that actually happens, then they will have only 74,000 more transit commuters and 266,000 more people using their cars.<sup>viii</sup> It is the 8/80 principle at work again — even when their forecasts are met. And since Vancouver has no plans to build any significant highways, their outlook for traffic congestion is very grim.

Most metro areas have a small percentage of people commuting by transit and rapid population growth — that is why the 8/80 principle is inevitable. All you have to do is understand how the 8/80 principle works and you will forever be cured of the idea that public transportation can help traffic congestion.

We have a traffic congestion problem and that is a highway problem. It can only be fixed with highway solutions such as High-Occupancy Toll (HOT) lanes.

*Cliff Slater is a regular columnist whose footnoted columns are at: [www.cliffslater.com](http://www.cliffslater.com)*

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#### **Footnotes:**

<sup>i</sup> “... hear success stories and lessons learned from experts.”

<sup>ii</sup> Salt Lake City opened at the very end of 1999, Houston in 2004 and Phoenix will open in 2008.

<sup>iii</sup> [Mobility Report, 1993-2003, Table 4.](#)

<sup>iv</sup> <http://www.unt.edu/cedr/gdcc.pdf> Table 7.

<sup>v</sup> Buses board three times more riders than Skytrain.

<sup>vi</sup> [http://www.translink.bc.ca/files/pdf/plan\\_proj/10year\\_project.pdf](http://www.translink.bc.ca/files/pdf/plan_proj/10year_project.pdf) pp. 5 & 10.

<sup>vii</sup> <http://www.th.gov.bc.ca/gateway/>

<sup>viii</sup> If they just maintain market share then they will have 44,000 more transit commuters and 296,000 more in autos.