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Cold Feet on Light Rail Even the Federal Government is Having Second Thoughts

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October 5, 2003 - We usually, and rightfully, grumble when the federal government tries to govern us from afar. But every solar eclipse or so, the feds get it right and we should pay attention. The federal government is in the midst of getting it right on the heavy cost of light-rail systems, and Orange County should pay close attention.

A new Bush administration proposal would require cities to pick up much more of the tab for light-rail projects. And the man in DC controlling transportation money for projects like Orange County's CenterLine light-rail project, Chairman of the House Transportation Appropriations Subcommittee Ernest Istook, R-Okla., just blocked a \$500 million federal grant that was supposed to go to Seattle's light-rail project, thus delaying construction indefinitely. Istook said light-rail systems are often political "status symbols" that pay little heed to congestion relief or cost-benefit ratios.

That's an ominous sign for Orange County and the \$1 billion CenterLine project. Light rail popped up all over the nation in recent decades largely because Washington was on board, but now the Federal Transit Administration faces a situation where it has far more grant requests than money.

Since half of CenterLine's expected funding comes from federal transit funds, even those who remain behind light rail on principle may have to confront a new and less hospitable political reality. After all, if Washington doesn't back the project, there is no project.

At over \$100 million per mile, the CenterLine project should feel pretty pricey to most residents. And if Orange County follows the storyline established by so many other light-rail projects, it's naïve to think that the cost won't swell even more. Still, it's easy to get lost in all the zeros after the price tag and forget how light-rail compares to other transportation alternatives.

The Arizona Transportation Research Center examined the cost of building freeways versus building light rail by asking a very simple question: How much does it cost taxpayers to move one person one mile?

The answer: about six cents for freeways and \$2.75 for light-rail. Put bluntly, light rail costs 40 times more than freeways. It's enough to make one ponder exactly how expensive light rail would have to be before local governments consider other alternatives.

Commuters tend to be more frugal when considering their personal transportation costs. If car buyers were comfortable considering cars that cost 40 times more than the average new car, it would mean John Carbuyer would be kicking the tires of million-dollar autos. To be fair, local governments have to consider the transportation needs of whole counties. But still, when using public funds, it would be nice if local governments adopted some of the bottom-line cost considerations consumers make when they buy things.

But Orange County residents don't have to get roped into a contentious roads-versus-rail showdown. There is a middle ground that could satisfy transit-backers and taxpayers alike.

The same study that revealed the dramatic price difference between roads and rail also noted that the person-mile cost of buses is \$1.59 - still much more than roads but considerably less than rail.

Of course, transit supporters often roll their eyes at the mention of the lowly bus. But it doesn't have to be lowly. With a little attention to improving aesthetics and a lot of attention to improving speed and frequency of service, Orange County could develop the kind of bus rapid-transit system that has realized success around the world.

Designating special routes for a bus rapid-transit system would mean that buses would not have to slog their way through traffic jams, and the reliable service would likely attract those who today find bus service too unpredictable.

Bus rapid-transit routes can be reserved for buses exclusively or they can include toll-paying private motorists. A Reason Foundation study recently outlined how the county could take the idea a step further and convert existing car-pool lanes into a network of High Occupancy Toll (HOT) lanes that would serve bus rapid transit and toll-paying motorists.

Orange County is home to the 91 Express Lanes, which means commuters are already familiar with variable tolling. Couple that with the county's abundance of car-pool lanes and you have an ideal environment for a HOT Network. By embracing bus rapid transit and HOT networks, Orange County could help halt the crush of light-rail money pits, and forge a new route toward sensible transit.

Orange County would also be wise to look north and learn from San Jose's disastrous light-rail system: light-rail ridership on the first line never exceeded half that projected in the original study. Think about how Orange County is laid out. There are very few people who would both live and work along single light-rail routes. And there are even fewer

people who are willing to drive or take a bus to the light rail, light rail to work, and vice versa on the way home.

Even the feds are getting cold feet about light rail. Doesn't that tell us everything we need to know?