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## Costly light-rail plan won't ease congestion

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In November, voters in the Puget Sound region will decide whether to approve a long-awaited regional transportation measure. These voters need to carefully ponder the consequences of the proposal's light-rail portion.

The state Legislature in 2002 passed the law creating a Regional Transportation Investment District that would cover King, Pierce and Snohomish counties. I was part of a bipartisan group of Puget Sound legislators who helped craft this plan. The idea behind RTID was to create a way for our region to vote on a package of much-needed highway projects to help address our congestion problems by targeting bottlenecks and other traffic problem spots, as well as how to pay for it.

Unfortunately, what we envisioned in 2002 and what will go before voters this fall are vastly different. Thanks to pressure from ardent light-rail supporters, the RTID proposal has been combined with the "Sound Transit 2" plan. This roads and transit package is expected to cost \$38.1 billion through 2027. Of this total, \$14.5 billion is for RTID and \$23.6 billion for Sound Transit 2.

The RTID/ST2 plan calls for the Sound Transit light-rail system to extend south into Pierce County. Light-rail proponents are touting the extension as another way to get more people out of their vehicles. While this option would certainly be available for commuters and others who currently rely on driving themselves, it's very important for people to understand that light rail's benefits won't come close to matching its exorbitant costs.

Sound Transit claims that the per-household costs of the roads and transit package will be \$150 per year plus \$80 for a vehicle valued at \$10,000. This is a lowball estimate that claims only 40 percent of sales tax revenues are paid by household taxpayers and consumers.

Keep in mind that approval of Sound Transit 2 would also extend current Sound Transit sales taxes. The combined Sound Transit, ST2 and RTID taxes will be up to about \$890 per household in 2008 and inflate at Sound Transit's estimated 5.2 percent annually.

Ouch, indeed.

Sound Transit claims that its ST2 program would greatly reduce traffic congestion, but its own estimates show otherwise. By 2030, ST2 would attract only 74,000 new transit trips per day out of the region's total of 16.4 million trips daily by 2030. Currently, transit's share of all trips in the central Puget Sound region is 2.7 percent. It is estimated that this share would rise only to 3.2 percent by 2030 without Sound Transit 2 and 3.7 percent if ST2 is approved.

There are two key reasons why light rail won't work nearly as well in the Puget Sound region as its fans say.

One is because the population density of this area isn't nearly as high as in heavy-density areas like New York or Hong Kong. Another reason is because of our region's shift from an industrial-based economy to one that's information-based. Decades ago, it was common for most people to work at a plant for one of the area's large employers, whether it was Boeing in Seattle or a lumber or pulp mill in Tacoma. In those days, bus transit was effective (as it is now, to a degree) since it could transport large numbers of riders to certain workplaces.

Thanks to the arrival of the information age and this region's expanding and diversifying economy, jobs aren't found only in Seattle or Tacoma. Nowadays, commuters are just as apt to work in Bellevue, Renton, Kent, Puyallup or Frederickson.

While bus transit has the flexibility to continue serving the needs of our work force as our economy expands geographically, light rail obviously lacks this flexibility. Thus, it can't meet the needs of most commuters and others as effectively as bus transit.

We need a transportation system tailored to the complex nature of most people's daily lives and patterns. Working parents don't just commute to and from jobs. They take their kids to practices and games. They go to the store or run other errands. Today's multitasking families need improvements to highway corridors and interchanges, not light rail.

A better solution to our region's congestion problems would be expanding our effective and successful bus system, especially Bus Rapid Transit programs. Upgrading our area's bus system would move people just as well as light rail, at a fraction of the cost. That would leave us the flexibility to invest the savings in expanding highway capacity in selected areas, which really would reduce our congestion.

When you consider how incredibly expensive the RTID-Sound Transit 2 package is, voters at least deserve a plan that will actually reduce congestion. The current proposal won't accomplish that.

Mercer Island resident Jim Horn is a former state legislator from the 41st District who served 16 years on House and Senate transportation committees.

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