

DATE: November 2, 1999
SUBJECT: EDITORIAL COMMENT

COMMUTER RAIL FOR ATLANTA?

The metropolitan Atlanta area has become a place of considerable fascination to me and I would guess to other analysts interested in metropolitan transportation. The area has “enjoyed” extraordinary levels of growth in this decade. While the nation is growing at less than one percent a year the Atlanta area has seen levels of growth of more than 40% in the nineties.

Let’s be clear at the outset that no metropolitan area is capable of responding to that kind of expansion with almost any of the forms of public infrastructure that citizens look to government to provide: schools, hospitals, libraries, airports or highways, especially in these times when obstruction of any public process of building anything can protract things endlessly. Add in the affluence of our present times, which can add 30 or 40% to travel activity, and we should not be surprised then that there is congestion - lots of it - in the peak periods.

One of the sad aspects of such a period of duress is that people believing in silver bullets rise to the occasion promising quick fixes. In transportation and probably in the other areas of public infrastructure there are no silver bullets. Every city has its maglev proponents, monorail advocates and believers in commuter rail as the solution to whatever problem you may have. Atlanta seems to be suffering from all of these solutions but in particular the commuter rail idea seems to have caught hold and needs addressing.

What’s wrong with the idea of being whisked to the center in a rail coach while sipping your coffee and reading the paper as promised? A few thoughts:

- While most transportation analysts think that subsidy, any subsidy, is a bad idea and should be either avoided, or very, very carefully justified, commuter rail subsidy is the most injurious. Why? Because it is a subsidy to the high income population paid for mostly by the low income population.
- Because transit funds are limited, funding to commuter rail robs support from transit needs of the auto-less and other low income populations that are really dependent on transit. This is a serious transportation problem not merely one of convenience.
- Commuter rail rarely has anything to do with the problem; its ridership is very limited and radially oriented and today’s suburban commuting world is heavily circumferentially oriented.
- If sprawl is a concern, then commuter rail is in the lead in sprawl generation. It is far in the lead in rewarding living at a distance. All modes of transportation serve to reduce the penalties of distance. That’s why we value them and they are all indictable as sprawl-generators just as better health care is indictable for the problems of old age. But commuter rail with average trip lengths three and four times that of auto commutes or other transit commutes are way out in front. Often the average trip length

of cars to commuter rail lots exceed the average trip length for all auto commuting. The only reason commuter rail is not a bigger offender in sprawl generation is that few people use it - hardly an endorsement. If commuter rail is going to be considered seriously ask how much we are going to pay each rider per trip to ride the train. Ask what the rider's median income is. Ask how could we better spend the money on getting inner city workers to jobs in the suburbs. Or ask how much would it cost to get the same people to volunteer to stay home!