



CASCADE POLICY INSTITUTE

# CASCADE COMMENTARY

April 2004

No. 2004-11

## Summary

TriMet claims that Interstate MAX will offer “fast, reliable service, improved access to jobs and housing and better transit service to North Portland.” However, a close examination of the facts shows that none of these assertions is true—and buses are a better solution.

Word count: 691

***“Buses can travel to virtually any neighborhood in the city by using the ubiquitous road network, which is already built and paid for.”***

## The Little Buses That Could

by John A. Charles

On May 1, the North Interstate MAX line will open. TriMet claims on its website that IMAX will offer “fast, reliable service, improved access to jobs and housing and better transit service to North Portland.” However, a close examination of the facts shows that none of these assertions is true.

First, IMAX will not be “fast,” taking 30 minutes to travel from the Expo Center to Pioneer Courthouse Square, a speed of roughly 15MPH. This offers no improvement over the Number 5 bus that currently runs down Interstate Avenue. Unfortunately IMAX speed will never get better because the system cannot offer express service.

Indeed, had improving transit speed along North Interstate actually been a priority, TriMet could have doubled the speed of IMAX by adding express bus service, for a fraction of the \$350 million spent on light rail—while still retaining local bus service. This would have given customers a variety of travel time options to choose from.

Second, IMAX will be no more “reliable” than bus service, and probably less so. The January ice storms showed that light rail is vulnerable to total shutdown under extreme winter conditions, just when transit service is needed the most. Buses routinely come to the rescue when trains fail.

Third, IMAX will not improve access to jobs and housing because it simply replaces an existing bus route. If increased access to North Portland were a TriMet goal, it could have been accomplished years ago by adding more bus service. Buses can travel to virtually any neighborhood in the city by using the ubiquitous road network, which is already built and paid for. In contrast, rail cars are so huge that they can only operate on major arterials or along highways. This requires neighborhood residents to change their commuting patterns in order to use the train. For most transit customers this is simply too inconvenient.

Light rail is often touted as a congestion relief strategy, but in fact IMAX has already made traffic much worse because TriMet reduced North Interstate Av-

enue from four lanes to two in order to obtain rail right-of-way. Traffic has increased in nearby parallel routes and few of the displaced motorists will use IMAX after it opens. Freight haulers cannot benefit from a passenger rail line: When truckers shift to other routes they have a disproportionately large effect on traffic congestion due to the size of their vehicles.

In recent years rail advocates have changed their arguments, conceding that light rail is not really a transit strategy, but a means to increase density in neighborhoods. But why is that desirable? People have been steadily migrating from central cities to the suburbs for over 100 years. The notion that light rail can somehow reverse this trend not only ignores a broad consumer preference for low density, it ignores the historical role of trains, which were used to move people out of over-crowded cities to new streetcar suburbs.

Light rail will not add density to the region unless we invest massive amounts of subsidies in the high-density, mixed-use projects so favored by urban planners. The subsidies are necessary because high-density projects are very expensive to build. That's why taxpayers have spent hundreds of millions of dollars subsidizing transit-oriented development in the Pearl District and along the MAX line, through the use of 10-year property tax abatements, reduced system development charges, tax credits, grants and low-interest loans.

Although Portland politicians pride themselves on being supporters of "sustainability," transit-oriented development is not, in any sense of the word, sustainable.

MAX was built on a budget of \$60 million per mile, while bus service could have been significantly improved for \$600,000 a mile (or less). Therefore light rail is at least 100 times more expensive, yet it's not 100 times better. In fact it's slower and less flexible than bus service and actually worsens congestion.

The Federal Transit Administration has belatedly come around to the idea that bus rapid transit is a much better investment than rail for most cities. For that reason the agency has adopted the slogan, "think rail, use buses." Portland would do well to embrace this idea for future transit planning.

---

*John A. Charles is environmental policy director at Cascade Policy Institute, a Portland think tank.*

***“Although Portland politicians pride themselves on being supporters of ‘sustainability,’ transit-oriented development is not, in any sense of the word, sustainable.”***

### **Attention editors and producers**

*Cascade Commentaries* are provided for reprint in newspapers and other publications, with credit given to author(s) and Cascade. Contact Cascade to arrange print or broadcast interviews on this commentary topic. Electronic text files are available online at [www.cascadepolicy.org/cctext/](http://www.cascadepolicy.org/cctext/).

Please contact:

Kurt T. Weber  
Vice President  
Cascade Policy Institute  
813 SW Alder Street, Suite 450  
Portland, Oregon 97205

Phone: (503) 242-0900  
Fax: (503) 242-3822

[www.cascadepolicy.org](http://www.cascadepolicy.org)  
[kurt@cascadepolicy.org](mailto:kurt@cascadepolicy.org)