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Transport in Seattle

Mono-mania

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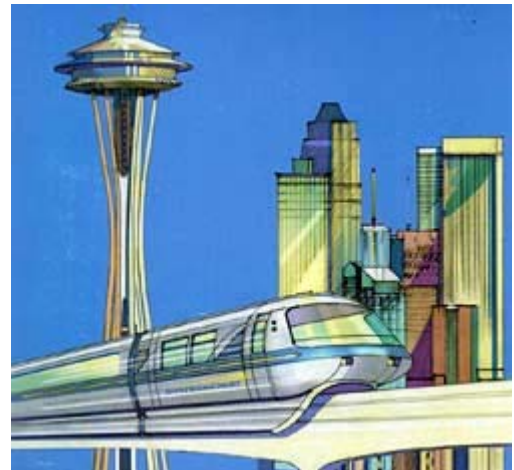
From The Economist print edition

A cool idea becomes a financial nightmare

IT IS home to Boeing, Starbucks and Microsoft (as well as to Ichiro Suzuki, the hippest baseball player in the world). But Seattle's other, lesser boast is that it probably has the worst transport planning in North America.

Geography doesn't help; traffic has to be squeezed between mountains and sea along a handful of narrow corridors. But the real bugbear is the region's conflicting or overlapping transport plans. Each local authority wants to control its own; each has its own administration, engineers and schedule planners; and all compete for passengers and funds.

In King County, where Seattle sits, Metro Transit's 1,300 buses work to ferry people between suburbs and the big city. A system called Sound Transit is building train and bus services throughout King County and next-door Pierce and Snohomish Counties (which also have their own bus systems). The city of Seattle operates a trolley line. Now construction may soon start on a monorail—an elevated, single-track train—that would wend its way for 14 miles (23km) from neighbourhoods in north Seattle to those in the city's south-west.



In your dreams

The monorail was approved by voters in 2002 as a populist alternative to Sound Transit, at the time beset by cost overruns and questions over its management. It seemed cool to vote for a train system no other big city is using on such a large scale. To add to its anti-elitist lustre, the monorail was designed to serve middle-income districts that Sound Transit neglected.

The cost for the first stage was pegged at around \$1.75 billion, paid for with a now unloved car tax. Since then—and this will shock no-one—the costs have increased to about \$1.9 billion. To pay for it, the monorail's managers plan to borrow a whopping \$9.3 billion, to be paid off over nearly 50 years.

That startling figure—nearly five times the cost—has caught the public's attention, to say the least. Michael Murphy, Washington state's treasurer, remarked in mid-June that the monorail's financing plan was "ludicrous" and threatened to damage the credit-rating of the entire state. Monorail officials have fired back, insisting that the system's cost is in line with what voters

approved, and complaining that they are being unfairly maligned for openly stating the full borrowing and operating costs. Maybe. But monorail planners also over-estimated tax revenues, which have fallen about one-third short of projections.

Now Seattle City Council must approve the monorail's financing plan before letting building go ahead. Weeks ago, approval seemed certain, but not any more. This, in a way, is unfair. For though the monorail scheme has flaws aplenty, the real culprit is the political culture that allowed its creation in the first place.

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