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Gathering Place

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Innocents abroad when Hawaii legislator goes to Puerto Rico

Rep. Marilyn Lee wrote a recent Star-Bulletin op/ed (7/5) lauding San Juan, Puerto Rico's new 10.7-mile heavy rail line, the Tren Urbano, or 'urban train.' At a recent meeting in Puerto Rico she said she had been invited to observe it and, "jumped at the chance because there are many similarities between Hawaii and Puerto Rico" and afterward concluded that, "We must proceed with our scheduled plan to build transit — our sister island has shown it can succeed."

Rep. Lee tells us that the construction costs for the 10.7-mile line was \$2.25 billion.ⁱ She does not tell us that the original forecast was \$766 million, or that the official forecast in the Final Environmental Impact Statement, approved by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), was \$1.25 billion. It's a "success" when your costs are twice the budget?

Let's relate that cost to Honolulu's transit project: Dividing the Tren Urbano's \$2.25 billion cost by its 10.7 mile length results in \$212 million per mile. Honolulu's Locally Preferred Alternative transit line is scheduled to be 28 miles long. That would suggest that Honolulu's rail construction costs could be \$6 billion. However, since Honolulu's labor costs are 47 percent higher than San Juan's we should expect an even higher cost.ⁱⁱ

Next, ridership: According to the San Juan Star, the region's daily newspaper, the first year's average daily ridership was 25,000 against the official forecast of 80,000ⁱⁱⁱ — Rep. Lee only tells us that the Tren Urbano ridership was "lower than projected." It's a success to only achieve 30 percent of what was forecast and approved by the FTA?

Let's relate that ridership to Honolulu, which has a population only 40 percent that of San Juan.^{iv} If we had 40 percent of San Juan's ridership that would mean daily ridership of 10,000, or about 4 percent of what TheBus presently carries. Of course, the official response is going to be, "that's ridiculous."

But consider this: The City and Parsons Brinckerhoff in 1992 forecast that if we did not build rail, bus ridership in 2005 would be 250,000 trips (excludes transfers) daily.^v We did not build rail but

according to the City we only had 178,000 trips in 2005, 30 percent less than forecast.^{vi} And there is nothing easier to forecast accurately than ridership for an existing, stable bus system.

As usual, when the financial performance goes awry on rail lines, the authorities take it out on the bus riders. In Puerto Rico, they tried to help their rail-caused financial problem by tripling bus fares and caused a great deal of aggravation among residents.^{vii}

The performance of the Tren Urbano has been so bad that FTA Administrator Dorn put in place new measures to, as she testified in Congress, “avoid problems like those we have seen in the Tren Urbano project.”^{viii}

The evidence clearly shows that the Tren Urbano is one of the worst failures in in U.S. transportation history. Yet Rep. Lee wants such a “success” here.

It is difficult to ever understand what a politician means by “success.” Over the years the alert observer of political activities will have noted that it has nothing to do with costs or even outcomes.

Political success appears to be based only on whether the voters perceive a project to be a success. That is to say, if it will help get the politician re-elected, then it is a success, otherwise it is a failure. To more conventional thinkers like us, costs and benefits are what matter.

Footnotes:

ⁱ [APTA refers to the project costing \\$2.5 billion.](#) Construction cost of \$2.5 billion for a 17.2 km or 10.6 mile line.

ⁱⁱ [Average annual pay for San Juan is \\$22,179 and Honolulu \\$32,531](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [“Urban Train usage could affect funding.” San Juan Star, June 12, 2006.](#)

^{iv} San Juan PR’s urban population was 2,217,000 in the 2000 Census versus versus 876,000 for Honolulu.

^v 1992 Final Environmental Impact Statement for the Honolulu Rapid Transit Program. Page S-25. Available at the Honolulu Municipal Library.

^{vi} [High Capacity Transit Corridor Project Alternatives Analysis Report, November 1, 2006. DTS Honolulu.](#) Page 3-4, Table 3-3.

^{vii} See San Juan Star letter at www.honolulutraffic.com/TrenUrbBusfares.pdf

^{viii} http://www.mtcwatch.com/pdfiles/4-04_DornFTA.htm Before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Transportation and Treasury, and Independent Agencies. Hearing on the Rating and Evaluation of New Fixed Guideway Systems on April 28, 2004

Original projected cost	\$0.77 billion
FEIS projected cost	\$1.25 billion
Actual cost	\$2.25 billion