

Rail transit: Follow the money; follow the logic

Rail transit projects produce more Requests for Proposals (RFPs) than do the far simpler highways projects. RFPs result in non-bid awards for both planners and rail equipment vendors. It is a breeding ground for overly generous campaign contributions even when operated legally. Highways projects are subject to competitive bidding.

Developers need land rezoned for housing so they can build homes but there is mounting resistance from residents who face growing traffic congestion. To justify rezoning elected officials need to show voters that they have a plan in place to reduce traffic congestion. Officials believe a rail transit “Vision” will satisfy voters on this issue.

Construction union leaders’ compensation varies with the size of its membership. The more construction workers, the more union dues collected and the more the union leadership is compensated. They need to keep the jobs coming to both achieve this and keep their members happy. They will join with the developers to lobby for rezoning.

Transportation Consultants who want the non-bid planning work associated with transit projects. Since rail transit planning is very complex, millions of dollars will be spent on it. For example, the City spent \$18 million dollars on planning for the now defunct Bus/Rapid Transit (BRT). The Harris campaign alone received \$435,000 that we know of from non-bid consultants on this project.

On the other hand, the HOT lanes option is a highway. It will have no stations, no rolling stock, and no Requests for Proposals; highways are simple.

Rail equipment vendors who want to win the award of the rail transit project. They will usually have responded to a RFP for a turnkey operation. This will of necessity be a non-bid award and so elected officials will have wide discretion over who gets the award.

Highway construction companies want the ability to bid on highway projects. However, highways are not complicated in their design and construction. Accordingly, the City and State put most highway work out to bid. This process is highly competitive and elected officials exercise little discretion over the outcome of the bidding. Thus, no significant campaign contributions are involved. In addition, the simplicity of the process makes a highway project less costly and less time consuming to complete.

Elected officials are always concerned with their reelection prospects. Raising campaign funds and gaining union support are uppermost in their minds.

Highways do not generate significant campaign contributions; rail transit generates a great deal. For this reason, elected officials usually prefer rail transit projects to highway projects.

In short, follow the money.