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**CROSS  
 COUNTRY**

# You Can't Hear Those Rails A-Hummin'

 By **TED VAN DYK**

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*Seattle*

Ah, Seattle, the Emerald City, temperate of climate, blessed in its natural setting, possessing a rich cultural life and global philanthropy, known for its diversity and tolerance, the nation's best-educated and literate city. My hometown.

But here, as in that other Emerald City in "The Wizard of Oz," there is a dark side. Local governance has come to resemble that in those old movie Westerns -- the ones where the powerful get what they want, public officials eat at their trough, and townsfolk eat dust and pay the bills.

Seattle has a long history of providing subsidies to those who least need them. Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen's Vulcan Inc. will receive at least \$500 million to help finance its South Lake Union commercial real estate development, to include a touristy trolley line from downtown. The city already subsidizes his Seahawks' football stadium. Owners of the Supersonics basketball team seek up to \$200 million.



AP Photo/Elaine Thompson

But nowhere is the misallocation of public money more evident than in public transportation, where Rail Madness eats billions that could otherwise be devoted to truly efficient transportation technologies.

Consider Seattle's version of Boston's Big Dig: The city's downtown bus tunnel is closed -- two years ahead

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of schedule -- for rail retrofit. Sound Transit, a regional agency, is obsessed with building a cost-ineffective light-rail system. It is preparing to bore twin tunnels five miles further northward, which will require moving between 121,000 and 167,000 dump-truck loads of dirt. Never mind that voters have not yet approved funds or a plan for a rail system going that far or beyond.

Seattle, once known as the Queen City, used to have interurban trolleys, street trolley cars and cable cars. Rails were ripped up as the postwar motor age took over. Seattle was fortunate, however, to develop an all-bus system between 1970 and 2000, which ranked high among major urban transit systems. Its service remains excellent, although it is diminishing as resources are diverted to rail.

The 1962 World's Fair brought a short monorail line which locals liked as a Seattle thing. (It is plagued by accidents and breakdowns and nearing monorail Valhalla; a recent collision between two cars has the system down again.) A cabdriver and others sponsored a ballot measure calling for construction of a monorail system from Ballard, in the northwest part of the city, to West Seattle, to be paid for mainly with annual taxes to be levied on Seattle car owners. Routing, design and financing details were sketchy.

But elected officials and media jumped aboard. The measure passed, a nonelected governing board was established, and car taxes began to be collected at a \$1 million a week rate. We finally killed the scheme last month after a new citywide vote, but car owners will be taxed many months more to pay off the money blown in the planning process by the self-serving board and staff.

Another ballot measure, in 1996, authorized Sound Transit to proceed with light rail. The chairman, during its developing period, was King County Executive Ron Sims; the finance chairman was Seattle Mayor Greg Nickels. Both lashed themselves politically to its mast. The priority became a light-rail system voters were promised would reach from south of Seattle-Tacoma airport to Northgate Mall in the city's northern end.

Rather than starting with a downtown-northward leg where ridership would be heavy, Sound Transit began with a less-busy southward leg. Some 80% of that line's prospective riders already use public transit. Homes and businesses in the mostly poor neighborhoods along the route are being torn down. Taxpayer-provided street money has been passed to favored neighborhood groups who attest to the progress the project is bringing.

The light-rail system, as now projected, will have far fewer stations, be far shorter, take years longer to build, and cost billions more than originally promised. What experts already knew -- that light rail is unsuited to cities where tunneling and water crossings are necessary -- is now apparent. Big engineering problems have arisen. Yet Messrs. Sims, Nickels, other local officials, Sen. Patty Murray and Rep. Norm Dicks have kept big money flowing to the project.

Washington state law provides that transit agencies and regional transit authorities may operate rail service where it is competitive in cost with bus, bus rapid transit and other technologies. It also requires that least-cost alternatives be presented for comparison to elected officials and voters before transportation technologies are approved. Both Sound Transit's light rail and its intercity Sounder service have cost far more than alternatives, the prices of which were not presented.

Rail Madness came via ballot measure -- the form of direct democracy tailor-made for willful, well-financed single-issue and single-interest coalitions to get what they want. Local law firms, financial institutions, unions, consultants, architects, builders and others who receive project-related public funds have formed a

strong alliance with local politicians who keep those rails a hummin'. Taxpayer funds even pay for print and broadcast ads hyping the projects.

While Rail Madness prevails, more urgent transportation priorities are not being met. The Nisqually earthquake of 2001 undermined and made dangerous two prime arterials here: the Alaskan Way Viaduct, along the city's waterfront, and the Evergreen Point Bridge, connecting Seattle to suburbs east of Lake Washington. State and some federal money finally is available to begin their replacement or repair but billions in local money must be found. The next quake could shake either transportation lifeline down.

On this matter, Seattle's elected leaders know something will turn up. Meantime, the City Council says it will study replacements for the rejected monorail. Buses or their modern cousin, bus rapid transit, might carry more people to more places for fewer tax dollars. But they would be boring and thus unworthy of the Emerald City.

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