

## Picture This Train Ride Through Houston

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Imagine that you just boarded a high-speed train at Bush Intercontinental Airport. You are gliding above the traffic at 70 mph and after a few brief stops you are in downtown Houston, quietly cruising the most beautiful and unique Main Street in America. Low-rise overpasses connect the one-way auto traffic on Fannin and Travis. The train tracks are recessed slightly below grade and marble walks and gardens lead up to the buildings on each side. Above you, a glass roof covers this 120 ft wide, Galleria like shopping/business/condominium mall.

At Main and Blodgett, there is a transfer station to carry you to Texas Southern University, the University of Houston or Hobby Airport. Continuing south on the Main Line you drop underground past the Museum District and rise to a stop at the Texas Medical Center. One year after opening, this system would be extended to the Astrodome and Galleria.

This system could have been built for less than the monorail proposed by former Mayor Kathy Witmire in the 1980's. If it had been built then, it would have three times the ridership, twice the initial miles, twice the speed...and would have been completed in half the time. Future extensions would have connected The Woodlands, Katy, Sugarland, Galveston and Baytown. This high-speed rail grid would have been only a short bus ride from any destination in the Metro service area.

In September 1989, I presented detailed engineering drawings of this system to the mayor and Houston City Council. My system received applause from 30 Rotary Clubs and dozens of civic groups, but has never been the subject of debate by any elected official or appointed member of the Metro Transit Authority Board.

As a candidate for mayor, Bob Lanier promised a vote on rail. Then voters were told that his run-off victory over Sylvester Turner was our vote on rail. Lanier and his appointed Metro board then began dismantling Metro's \$600 million rail trust fund with wasteful spending on liquefied natural gas-powered busses, under-utilized HOV lanes, traffic monitoring and abandoned rail lines.

The police fund transfer, so much touted by Lanier has lowered crime the same amount as the national average. Had the Metro fund remained intact, it would have doubled during the Lanier term. If there had been a proper public debate and referendum to decide on a transit plan, the chosen system would have qualified for federal matching funds that would have added \$600 million to the local economy.

If the Bush Intercontinental-to-Hobby connector described above had been constructed, it would have connected minority communities with employment and education opportunities. Downtown would already be revitalized. A 1.7 mile extension from the Medical Center would have connected the Astrodome and would have reduced parking and commuting time to sporting events. This rail might have added the needed fan support for the Oilers and Astros without new stadium or team transfers.

To be blunt about it. Bob Lanier's ultimate impact on our future is less favorable than current popularity poles reflect. We must demand a more responsive form of leadership. The greatest principle of our democracy is informed consent.

It is unconscionable that any individual would presume to make a billion dollar decision on the use of public money without legitimate open debate. Rail systems are in place or planned in virtually all of the largest cities in the world because rail does move large numbers of people efficiently.

For many rail supporters, the Katy rail commuter line is claimed to be the necessary first step. But, at-grade "light rail" would require removal or paralleling of the existing freight tracks because these two systems require different ballast, ties, rails and switching. At-grade rail would block auto traffic for three minute intervals of every seven minute interval during rush hour traffic.

As a simple test, block traffic at every intersection along the Katy Freeway for one day and witness the gridlock. Separating the rail from auto traffic, on a fixed guide-way system increase costs fourfold.

It is mandatory that Houston's first rail segment be fixed guide-way and that it serve the seven-day-a-week ridership population. Connecting the airports, seven universities, downtown and the Texas Medical Center with reliable high-speed rail would remove 40,000 cars a day from the roadways and improve every aspect of life in Houston.

Low density is the red herring reason for no rail. The 95 mile long Bay Area Rapid Transit system has an eight mile segment under the bay with absolutely zero density. The BART passes miles of Oakland wharves with minimum density. Overall the Bush-to-Hobby Connector has similar density to BART, which is fed by short transfer busses at each rail terminal.

When transit workers went on strike recently in the San Francisco area, 250,000 BART riders switched to autos and created traffic and parking problems throughout the Bay area...which suggests that the best way to solve traffic problems is to get people out of their cars.

**If we continue to build our city on a 1950's suburban dream, we will have a 21<sup>st</sup> century nightmare. We must have diversity in our transportation options. We demand an open debate on rail, followed by a referendum.**

## Afterword

Emphasis added on last paragraph. This is being sent to major Houston media outlets in hopes that his page is reposted on the Chronicle archives. If not there will be expanded "Afterword" detailing the thousands of hours that I invested in legitimate transit debate....and the OVERT CRIMINAL EFFORTS THAT BLOCKED THIS DEBATE.