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Editorial: Does light rail to airport make financial sense?

With costs rising, even longtime backers have to question whether it's still practical

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For several years now, this page has been an enthusiastic supporter of the notion of extending light rail to the Sacramento International Airport. All things being equal, we're still enthusiastic about it. But some recent numbers suggest that all things are far from equal.

The numbers in question stem from Regional Transit's light-rail extension from 8th and K street downtown to the Amtrak Station at 5th and H. That extension, a mere six-tenths of a mile, was supposed to take 15 months to construct and cost \$35 million. It took 30 months and cost \$46 million. That's twice as much time and 30 percent more money than originally estimated.

RT cites many reasons for this, as The Bee's Tony Bizjak noted in a recent article. Builders ran into unmapped underground utility lines and Indian artifacts. Federal judges complained that the tracks, as originally routed, ran too close to the downtown courthouse, posing a potential security risk. When federal judges complain, government listens, so the tracks had to be rerouted. And there was lots of rain last year, too. If it's not one thing, it's another.

As a result of such factors, the per-mile cost of the downtown extension turned out to be an eye-popping \$77 million.

The figures from the downtown extension raise obvious questions about RT's ambitious plans to build light rail to the airport: Can the region afford light rail to the airport? Is it the best way to use limited transit dollars? Are there more cost-effective alternatives?

Just a few years ago, light rail to the airport was projected to cost \$650 million. By the time it's built, in 2020 at the earliest, inflation will bring those costs to close to \$1 billion.

There is not a lot of controversy about light rail to Natomas. There is a big enough population there now to justify such an expansion, and the transit-deprived residents of Natomas have been waiting for light rail for years. But at an estimated \$60 million to \$65 million a mile, it's hard even for longtime supporters to make the case for extending light-rail tracks all the way to the airport.

It may be that something other than cost-effective transit is driving the plan. People like the idea of light rail to the airport. It polls well. The Sacramento Transportation Authority has said it is committed to having an additional transportation funding source in place for the county by 2012 that will raise an amount equivalent to a half-cent sales tax, or approximately \$100 million a year. The new funding source almost certainly will require a public vote. The project most popular with voters is light rail to the airport. So planning for it is a political plus.

But it's not enough to be popular. A \$1 billion light-rail extension to the airport has to make cost-effective transportation sense. Costs have soared and RT's budget – and level of service – has taken a beating since light rail to the airport was first approved.

Before transportation planners move too far down this track, they should look at the alternatives – express buses to the airport is one – and make their decision based on what makes the most transportation sense for the region, not on what polls well.

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