

## **Light Rail Transit in the Spokane Region** (Document listing: Preferred Alternative)

### Preferred Alternative:

The Boards of the Spokane Transit Authority and the Spokane Regional Transportation Council jointly established the Light Rail Project Steering Committee in June 2000. It was charged to assist in the development of light rail for the south valley corridor from downtown Spokane east to Liberty Lake and to guide the project through design, construction, and start-up. Funding was provided through a series of federal grants totaling nearly \$9 million to be used for the conceptual engineering, environmental impact analysis, and related studies necessary to complete the initial alternatives analysis.

The complete report can be downloaded in PDF by selecting it from the *InlandRail* documents list after you return.

The project had four core purposes.

- Implement the region's strategy to promote and encourage mixed and transit-oriented land uses.
- Provide additional transportation choices to create a more balanced, integrated regional network.
- Link activity centers to enhance regional mobility for the growing populations and labor force.
- Use transportation planning as a catalyst for growth management and economic development.

After more than six years of deliberation and technical analysis, the Steering Committee published its recommendations for a single-track, 15.5-mile light rail system with 13 stations at key locations along the publicly owned east-west corridor adjacent to existing freight rail lines and Sprague Avenue. It was proposed to initially link Spokane's downtown business core with the University District, revitalize the East Central Neighborhood, increase accessibility to the County's Fair & Expo Center, connect activity centers in Spokane Valley, and terminate on the east end at the rapidly growing City of Liberty Lake. Subsequent expansion to the west would tie into the Spokane International Airport and to the east, linking Spokane and Kootenai Counties with service to Post Falls and Coeur d'Alene. At least three different north-south lines were envisioned along Maple-Ash, Division, and in the median of the North-South Freeway, already under construction. The modest right-of-way and stations design was planned for later expansion, avoiding high up-front construction costs for capacity that wouldn't be needed until further density warranted it.

The estimated cost of the recommended system was \$263 million (in 2006 dollars) or about \$17 million per mile. This was the lowest cost light rail system in-design or under construction in the United States at the time. By contrast, Tacoma's light rail link was built for about \$50 million per mile and Seattle is currently building their system at over \$179 million per mile. The very affordable cost of the system proposed for this region can primarily be attributed to it being proactively planned in advance of growth rather than in reaction to congestion.

One of the most strongly debated aspects of the proposed system was a decision to recommend diesel propulsion rather than electrification. At the time, the estimated cost to build and operate the

system was considered the most important criteria. Electrification is favored by most but it adds roughly 20% to the construction and up to 30% or more to the cost of operations. Connecting a regional light rail system to the waste-to-energy plant would be mutually beneficial to both systems.

Public input was solicited throughout the process, serving as a touchstone for the committee to ensure it was representing the interests of the overall public. In every instance, statistical and anecdotal feedback indicated the strongest support favored continued development of a light rail system rather than bus rapid transit.