The Inland Empire Rail Transit Association recently (4/28/2009) received an email from the Northwest Climate Change Center (NWCCC) in which NWCCC expressed some consternation regarding a recent development involving AVISTA and STA, wherein the AVISTA/STA consortium is apparently asking for $75 million in Federal stimulus money to proceed in some manner with an electrified bus rapid transit system along the South Valley Corridor – the same route prior identified for light rail in the study undertaken by STA's disbanded Light Rail Steering Committee.

In response, Inland Rail board president, KC Traver responded for the board with the following email:

> *Phyllis Holmes, Dick Raymond, and I also met with Roger Woodworth / Judy Cole from Avista, several weeks ago, to discuss e-Brt. They were very enthusiastic about information provided to Roger by a European manufacturer of electric buses. I advised them to not respond too quickly to an obvious sales pitch and suggested they perform some analysis on the application of electrified BRT specific to the Spokane region. I don't know what the basis is for asking for $75 million because there has been no engineering analysis to establish a cost threshold. I guess STA would just "do what it can with the amount of money provided". Additional points of discussion included:*
>
> 1. *The light rail steering committee looked at the cost of BRT and concluded it would be $50-$60M if using diesel buses on existing streets in mixed traffic with few of the positive influences anticipated with an investment in light rail.*
> 2. *The Steering Committee learned the cost of BRT on dedicated right-of-way began to approach the low-end cost of light rail for the same corridor. The overhead electric catenary system would add to the cost, both in capital investment and in recurring maintenance & repair.*
> 3. *Electric buses require two overhead wires to complete the circuit and light rail requires only one as the circuit is completed through the steel rails on the ground. Not everyone will find a proliferation of overhead wires as aethestically pleasing. Two versus one exacerbates that perspective.*
> 4. *Dedicated right-of-way for buses will eventually be subjected to pressure to allow additional traffic, much the same way that HOV lanes are pressured to allow other traffic. They are seen as "empty" even if relatively high frequency of service is provided on them, i.e. 10-minute headways.*
> 5. *Most people are much more inclined to ride trains than buses, proven through numerous national studies and, under pressure, admitted to by the Federal Transit Administration.*
> 6. *There are very few examples of buses, electric or otherwise, acting as a tool of economic development for a particular transportation corridor.*
> 7. *There are numerous examples of light rail stimulating development within a 1/4 - 1/2 mile radius of station locations, often with significant results.*

8. *Electric buses on existing streets are likely to have the same influence on development that currently exists, i.e. linear development that will tend to be more auto oriented than pedestrian oriented, particularly if the stops are as frequent as existing fixed route service.*
9. *BRT's "flexibility" to move routes to where changing conditions occur is exactly one reason that they do not incentivize development because of the relatively low level of required capital investment in public infrastructure.*
10. *Seattle invested in electric BRT several years ago and are now in the process of replacing that system with electric light rail. That seems to beg the question, "what is the best long-term investment in transportation?" I would advise that it would be much more cost effective to commit to the long-term objective and not succumb to the siren's song of a cheap system that tries to be something it isn't.*
11. *I believe electric BRT would have applicability within an existing corridor that is already developed and somewhat congested, i.e. north-south on Division, perhaps Monroe, or even Maple / Ash. Electric BRT east-west through the South Valley Corridor will be mostly about building another street rather than stimulating economic development and implementing growth management.*
12. *The cost of ALL construction, including the track bed, plus the annual M&R was included in the regional cost estimates provided for the light rail project and incorporated into the funding strategy that was proposed. If e-BRT does not similarly include the same costs then the project is not fully conveying the true cost of the system.*
13. *Railroad tracks last longer than streets and provide a smoother ride. The ride quality of BRT on existing streets is only as good as the quality of the roadbed. For much of the region's streets, that is not real good and not cheap to maintain.*
14. *The cost of construction of a full-depth street cross-section may be more than that necessary to construct a track bed, outside of the urban core.*
15. *The unit operating cost per rider is demonstrated to be higher for BRT than for light rail. The reason is with BRT every bus requires a driver and that can be 80% or more of the cost of operating the system. Light rail vehicles can be coupled in train sets of typically up to four vehicles in length without adding an additional driver. Moreover, LRT vehicles typically have greater capacity as they don't have to fit within the traditional urban street geometry.*
16. *At least 4 different public surveys conducted over a 4-year period separately indicated greater support for light rail than BRT from among the community at large.*

One has to wonder why Avista is spending so much time / effort, at some expense to rate payers, to conduct transit planning. Both electrified LRT or e-BRT would use electricity and reduce emissions so why Avista prefer one system over the other?

Why is STA so willing to commit to eBRT on dedicated right-of-way based on someone from Avista telling them it's a great idea when they sponsored a 6-year, $9M study that concluded regional light rail was the way to go?

I think an open community discussion on the merits of BRT versus rail transit would at least bring these issues to light so the community can make an informed decision.

That much I wholeheartedly support.

Regards,
KC Traver