



## **Great Rail Disasters** ***The Impact of Rail Transit on Urban Livability***

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Does rail transit improve urban livability? To answer this question, the James Madison Institute reviewed transit, congestion, cost, safety, and other data for all two-dozen U.S. urban areas that have rail transit.

Our conclusion is that, far from enhancing livability, rail transit reduced the livability of every urban area that has it. Miami and Ft. Lauderdale's rail systems score particularly poorly because consume more energy than autos and haven't stopped the erosion of transit's share of travel. During the 1990s, transit's share of commuters declined by 10 percent and its share of overall travel declined by 14 percent.

Our study found that rail transit tends to reduce the mobility of both transit riders and auto users. Collectively, the two-dozen urban areas with rail transit lost 33,000 transit commuters during the 1990s. By comparison, the two-dozen largest regions with bus-only transit gained 27,000 transit commuters in the 1990s.

Rail advocates often call rail critics "anti transit," but our analysis shows it is rail transit that is anti transit. During the 1990s, a period of rapid growth in the transit industry, transit's share of motorized travel declined in two out of three rail regions.

For auto users, rail transit doesn't relieve congestion; in fact, it seems to make it worse. Sixteen of the twenty urban areas with the fastest rising congestion have rail transit, and one of the other four is building rail.

One reason rail transit doesn't work is its high cost. Our study found that buses are far most cost effective than rails, while freeways are ten times as cost effective at moving people as Miami and Ft. Lauderdale's rail lines.

Congestion in rail regions is rapidly growing because rail's high cost leads most such regions to dedicate 50 to 80 percent of their transportation funds to transit systems that carry only 1 to 5 percent of urban travel. This doesn't leave much left over to relieve congestion for the other 95 to 99 percent of travelers.

Nor is rail transit particularly good for the environment. Three out of five rail lines consume more energy, per passenger mile, than automobiles. Miami's heavy-rail line, for example uses twice as much energy to move people as passenger cars.

Since automobiles pollute most in congested traffic, rail transit often leads to more, not less, urban air pollution. Even where rail transit can reduce air pollution, the cost is exorbitant—roughly \$1 million per ton of reduced emissions, compared to \$10,000 per ton for many other air quality measures.

Rail transit fails because it doesn't go from where you are to where you want to go. Even if Miami and Ft. Lauderdale built another 100 miles of rail transit, well over 95 percent of all motorized travel in the region would still be by automobile. Where rail transit does go, it goes slow, rarely averaging more than 30 miles per hour.

Despite Chicago's extensive rail network and an 18-percent increase in jobs, Chicago transit carried 15-percent fewer riders in 2000 than in 1990. Tourists love Washington, DC's beautiful subway system. Yet Washington lost 22,000 transit commuters in the 1990s even while it gained more than 100,000 jobs. If rail transit doesn't work in these regions, how will it work in Florida?

Our research shows Florida cities can reduce congestion and provide better transit service than rail transit, all without raising taxes. Transit agencies can improve transit using bus-rapid transit, which means running buses on rail schedules. At a fraction of the cost of rail and without waiting for years of construction, we can start running bus-rapid transit lines that go faster and serve more areas than rail.

To reduce congestion and further improve transit service, Florida cities can turn existing high-occupancy vehicle lanes into high-occupancy/toll (HOT) lanes, which low-occupancy vehicles can use by paying a toll. Toll revenues can then build a complete network of HOT lanes throughout the region, speeding the bus-rapid transit lines and reducing congestion for everyone.

The choice is clear: Spend billions of dollars on rail transit lines that actually reduce urban livability; or relieve congestion and improve transit without raising taxes by building a HOT-lane network and running bus-rapid transit. I hope Florida chooses wisely.

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