

The region's leader in urban planning loses a major battle

Right Wing Derails Light Rail

by Bernie Bottomly

The defeat of Portland's South/North light rail bond measure at the November ballot ended a long series of local electoral victories for the region's highly regarded light rail program. With their success in spearheading the opposition, the libertarian right gained new credibility in this area of politics.

Light rail was first put to a vote in Portland in 1990 when, with little opposition, 74 percent of the region's voters approved a bond for construction on the West Side. Four years later, 64 percent of voters approved a larger bond for the South/North Project, again, with little opposition.

It was in 1993, when the region approached the state for matching funds, that the Cascade Policy Institute (a Portland-based, right-wing non-profit) in alliance with conservative Christians and several economists at Portland State University, emerged as vocal opponents.

With funding from ultra-conservative executives Loren Parks and Mark Hemstreet (the latter owns Shilo Inn), CPI and its allies built a small but vocal cadre of rail opponents. Although they failed to stop state funding, they forced extended legislative debate.

After a highly contentious and partisan legislative session, funding was approved. However, rail opponents gathered sufficient signatures to force a statewide election on the measure. With CPI at the fore, in cooperation with Bill Sizemore and Oregon Taxpayers United, state funding was defeated.

In 1998, regional leaders placed the previously approved bonds on the ballot, necessary because the loss of state funding required a revised project.

Right Wing attack emerges

CPI and its allies served as a mouthpiece for anti-light rail information, giving legitimacy to fringe arguments previously rejected as not credible by mainstream media. CPI developed a cadre of so-called transportation experts as



spokespeople. Ironically, the most prominent of these was John Charles, former director of the Oregon Environmental Council — which had long supported light rail.

Perhaps most important, CPI became part of a growing national network of libertarian think tanks pursuing an ultra-conservative political agenda under the guise of academic research. It also became clear that attacking light rail was part of the Right's overall attack on government. Why? At that juncture, none of the other issues the Right has recently organized around, such as abortion or gays and lesbian rights, were in the legislature. Opposition to light rail represented a new opportunity for expanding the Right's base. Denver, Seattle and other cities pursuing light rail projects already report that CPI spokespeople or materials have shown up in opposition there.

This defeat may represent the end of the era during which urban liberals and rural conservatives together forged the land use and transportation strategies that guided Portland's growth, and the emergence of a new political era characterized by a more conservative center of political gravity, as well as a weaker sense of community and the sacrifices necessary to maintain livability.

Portland's light rail plan represented one of the best transportation options available; its defeat means citizens have less effective, defensive strategies for congestion left to choose from, and, in fact, they will only be able to vote with their wallets. As the conservatives wanted, the "free market" will dictate the future of transportation in Portland, and we have only to look at the vast sprawl and poor livability of cities such as Phoenix to see what that might mean.



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