



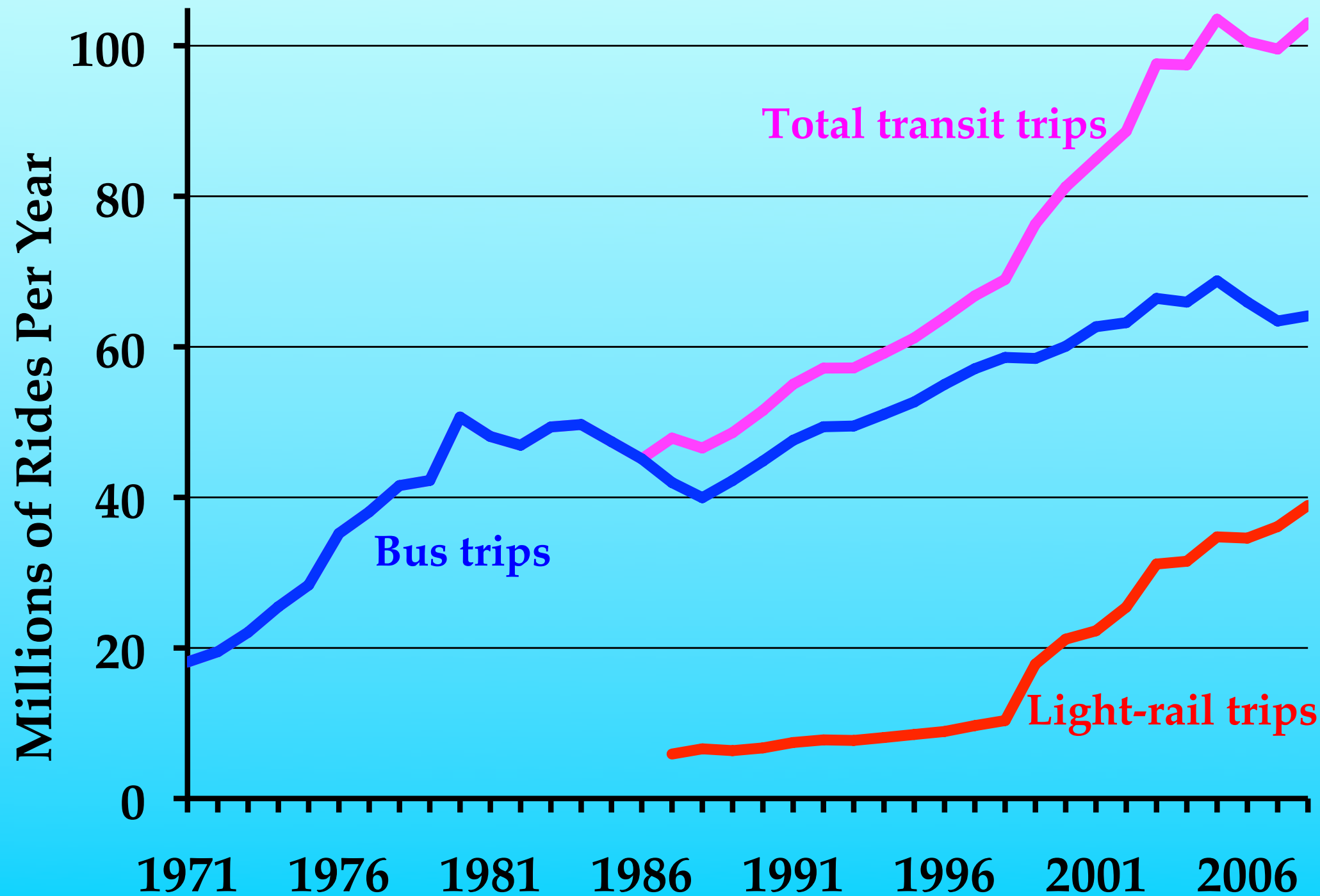
Is Portland Light Rail a Success?

Portland claims that its light-rail system is a great success.



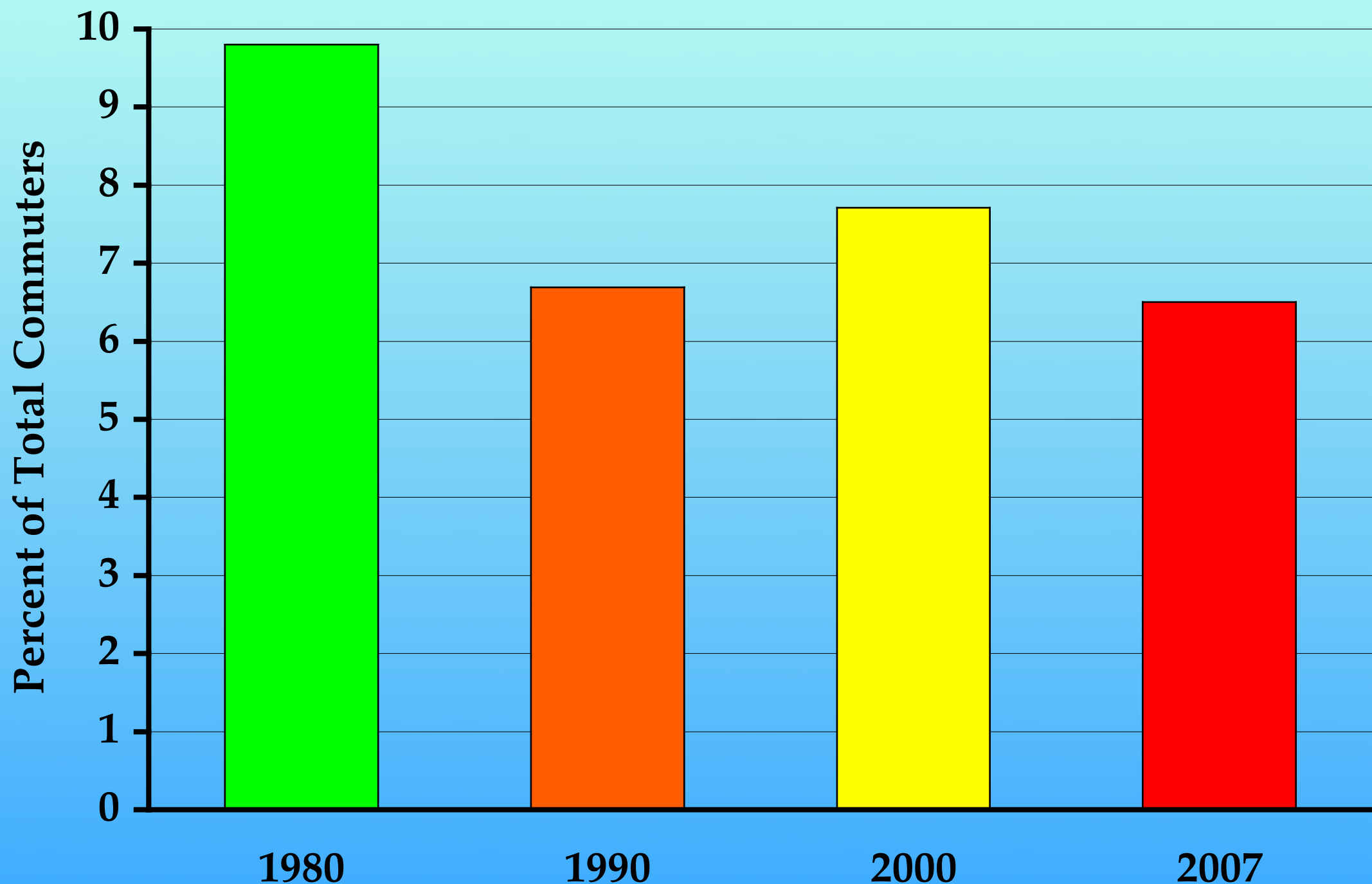
I don't want to say no one rides it, but one day a light-rail car left the airport with only one passenger on board. Coyotes like to go where they can find solitude from people.

Portland Transit Ridership



Unlike some cities, Portland's transit ridership has grown since opening the light rail in 1986. But it actually grew faster in the 1970s when it had only buses. When it started building light rail, ridership fell partly because TriMet raised bus fares to help pay for railcost overruns.

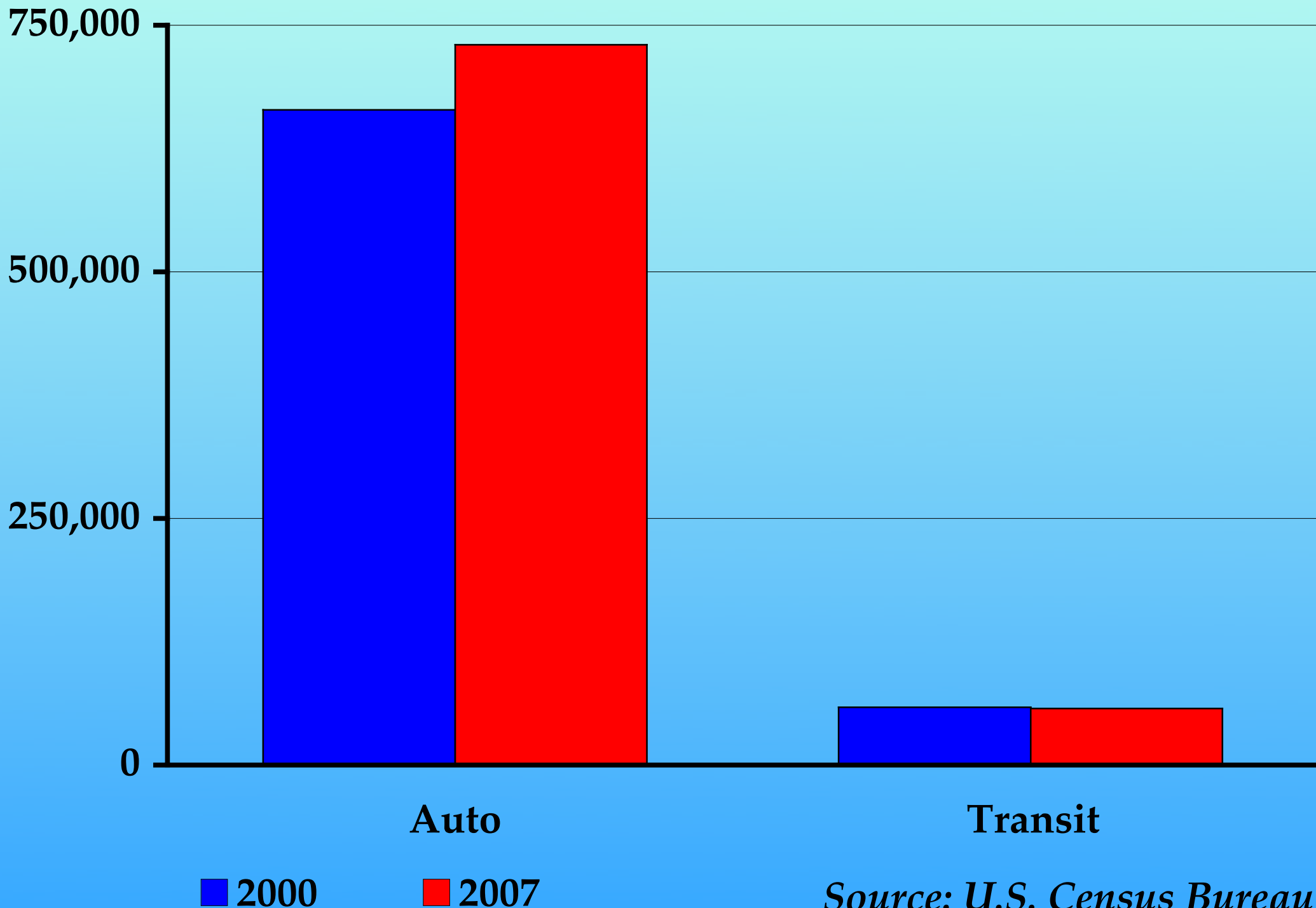
Portland-Area Commuters Using Transit



Source: Census Bureau

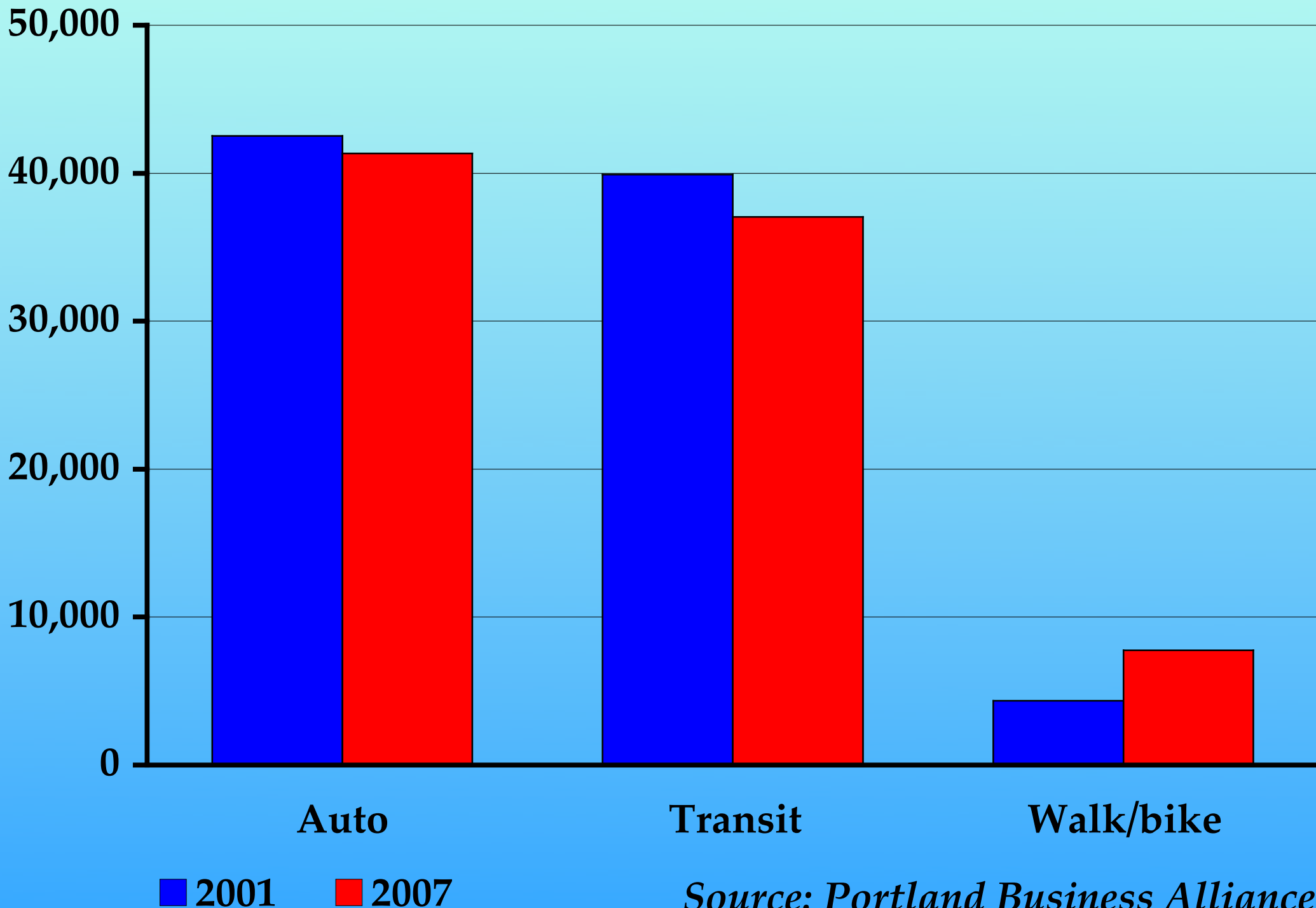
Since light rail was built in the 1980s, Portland experienced a decline in the share of area commuters who ride transit to work, with a further decline since the streetcar opened in 2001.

Portland-Area Commuters



Moreover, between 2000 and 2007, the actual number of commuters taking transit to work declined, while the number of commuters driving to work grew by more than the total number of transit commuters.

Downtown Portland Commuters



The number of workers downtown, where the streetcar is located, taking transit to work has also declined since the streetcar opened.



Far from relieving congestion, light rail has added to it by diverting funds away from things that actually could relieve congestion. Meanwhile, much of the increase in transit ridership has been at midday and on weekends when it does little to relieve congestion.



“High-Capacity Transit”?

Portland often called light rail “high-capacity transit.” This is misleading. An individual light-rail car may hold more people than a bus, but it is not high-capacity transit.



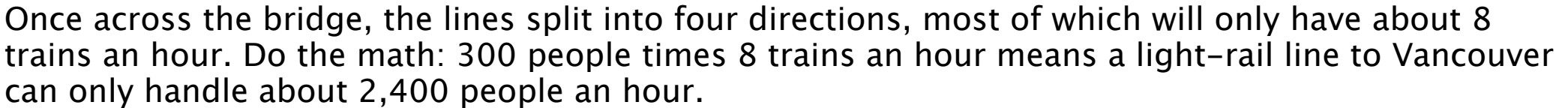
In fact, the term “light rail” is actually short for “light-capacity rail,” as opposed to “heavy-capacity rail,” such as subways that can have trains of 8 or 10 cars.



Portland light-rail trains can only be two cars long, and with each car holding a maximum of about 150 people, that makes 300 people per train.



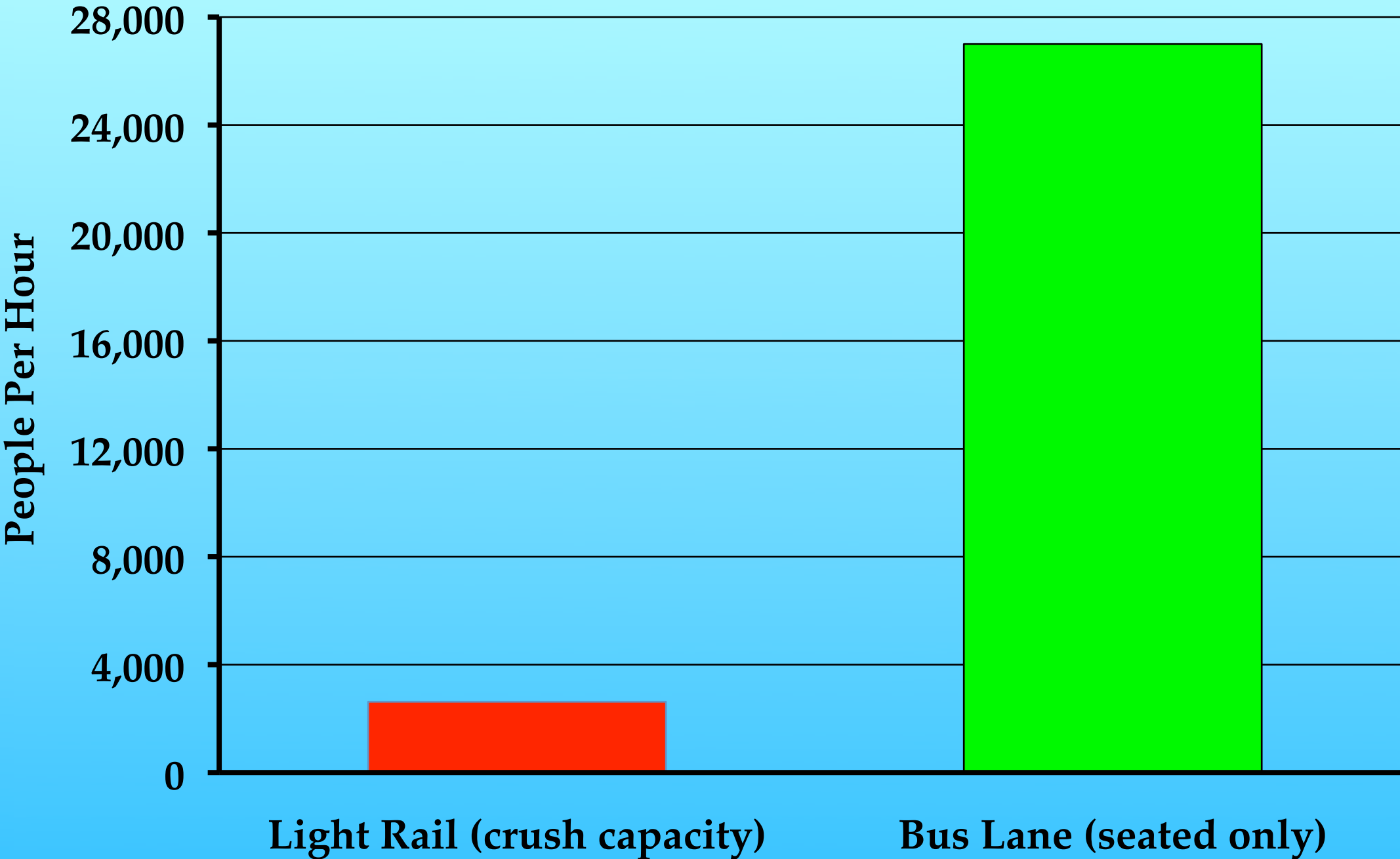
Currently, all trains to the east side must cross the Steel Bridge, which can only handle 30 trains per hour in each direction.





By comparison, C-Trans buses have 45 seats. These buses can safely run every six seconds on a freeway lane.

Transportation System Productivity



That means, even without anyone standing on the buses, a bus lane could move 10 times as many people as light rail. Light-rail is truly low-capacity transit.

“Rapid Transit”?



Another term you often hear for light rail is “rapid transit.” But light rail is anything but rapid.



Portland's light rail averages around 20 mph, and the line from the Rose Garden to the Expo Center takes 14 minutes to go 5 miles, for an average speed of just 23 mph.



“Development-Oriented Transit”?

Portland also often claims that light rail stimulates development.



In fact, ten years after opening Portland's first light-rail line, planners sadly reported to the city council that not a single transit-oriented development had been built along the line, and much of the land remained vacant.

“We have not seen any of the kind of development—of a mid-rise, higher-density, mixed-use, mixed-income type—that we would’ve liked to have seen” along the MAX line.

—Mike Saba, Portland City Planner, 1996

The reason, developers told the city council, is that existing dense developments saturated the demand, and what was in short supply was single-family homes.

“We are in the hottest real estate market in the country,” yet “most of those sites [along the MAX line] are still vacant.”

—Charles Hales, City Commissioner, 1996



In response, city commissioner Hales proposed to subsidize developments with property tax break, tax-increment financing, below-market land sales, and other giveaways to developers.

10 year property tax exemption

“The primary reason for underbuilding in urban areas is the lack of financial feasibility. There is little evidence to support the conclusion that the high densities required in Urban Centers, in the absence of public assistance, are profitable under current market conditions, and that developers and property owners are either unaware that they could make more money by building denser, or prohibited from doing so by physical or policy constraints.”

from: *Metro Urban Centers: An Evaluation of the Density of Development.*

From Portland City Council Agenda:

1620 Grant a ten-year property tax exemption to Hoyt Street Properties, LLC for new multiple-unit housing on the block bounded by NW 11th, 12th, Lovejoy, and Marshall Streets (Second Reading Agenda 1587) Disposition: Ordinance No. 175047.



details: www.saveportland.org

Developments such as this one -- built by the construction company owned by the family of the general manager of Portland's transit agency, who funneled subsidies to his family company -- received ten-year property tax exemptions along with other support.

\$16,850,000.00 Exempt from Property tax (for 10

“The primary reason for underbuilding in urban areas is the lack of financial feasibility. There is little evidence to support the conclusion that the high densities required in Urban Centers, in the absence of public assistance, are profitable under current market conditions, and that developers and property owners are either unaware that they could make more money by building denser, or prohibited from doing so by physical or policy constraints.”

from: *Metro Urban Centers: An Evaluation of the Density of Development.*

From Portland City Council Agenda:

1226 Grant a ten-year property tax exemption to Hoyt Street Properties, LLC for new multiple-unit housing on the block bounded by NW 11th, 12th, Lovejoy and Kearney Streets (Second Reading Agenda 1179)



details: www.saveportland.org

More than \$100 million of properties are exempt from taxes for being “transit-oriented.”

Urban Renewal (TIF) Districts
(subsidies in millions)

District Color	Subsidy (Millions)
Purple	\$335.0
Pink	\$772.6
Green	\$233.9
Light Green	\$167.5
Light Blue	\$165.0
Light Purple	\$143.6
Light Pink	\$66.3
Yellow	\$288.6
Orange	\$75.0

Scale: 0 to 2 miles

PRANI RENEWAL BASE MAP JANUARY 2015

**“It is a myth to think
that the market will
take care of
development along
transit corridors.”**

***—Charles Hales, City
Commissioner, 1996***



In 1996, Commissioner Hales admitted that rail transit by itself did not stimulate development.

“The \$55 million streetcar line has sparked more than \$1.5 billion (and growing) in new development.”

***—Charles Hales, 2006,
now with HDR***



But in 2002, Hales quit his job mid-term and went to work for consulting firm HDR, where he sells streetcars to other cities based on the claim that the Portland streetcar stimulated development.

Transit Cooperative Research Program

Sponsored by the Federal Transit Administration

RESEARCH RESULTS DIGEST

June 1995--Number 7

as: IA Planning and Administration and VI Public Transit Responsible Senior Program Officer: Dianne S Schwager

An Evaluation of the Relationships Between Transit and Urban Form

This TCRP Digest summarizes the results of Phase I of TCRP Project H-I, "An Evaluation of the Relationships Between Transit and Urban Form." The objectives of this phase were to 1) review the existing literature on transit and urban form relations, 2) develop a framework to synthesize this knowledge, 3) identify gaps in current knowledge, and 4) develop the research plan for the balance of the project. This Digest, which brings together the results of more than 30 technical and practical examinations of transit and urban form relationships, provides a base of knowledge for future planning and decision making. The research plan will be implemented in Phase II. The Digest was prepared by Roberto Cervero, University of California, Berkeley and Samuel Seskin, Parsons Brinckerhoff Quade & Douglas, Inc.

INTRODUCTION

Study of transit and urban form relationships is getting wide attention in the 1990s. Transit operators, urban and land-use planners, real estate developers, and others are beginning to realize that transit does not spur economic development.

of the densities and mix of uses that they must encourage to ensure system viability.

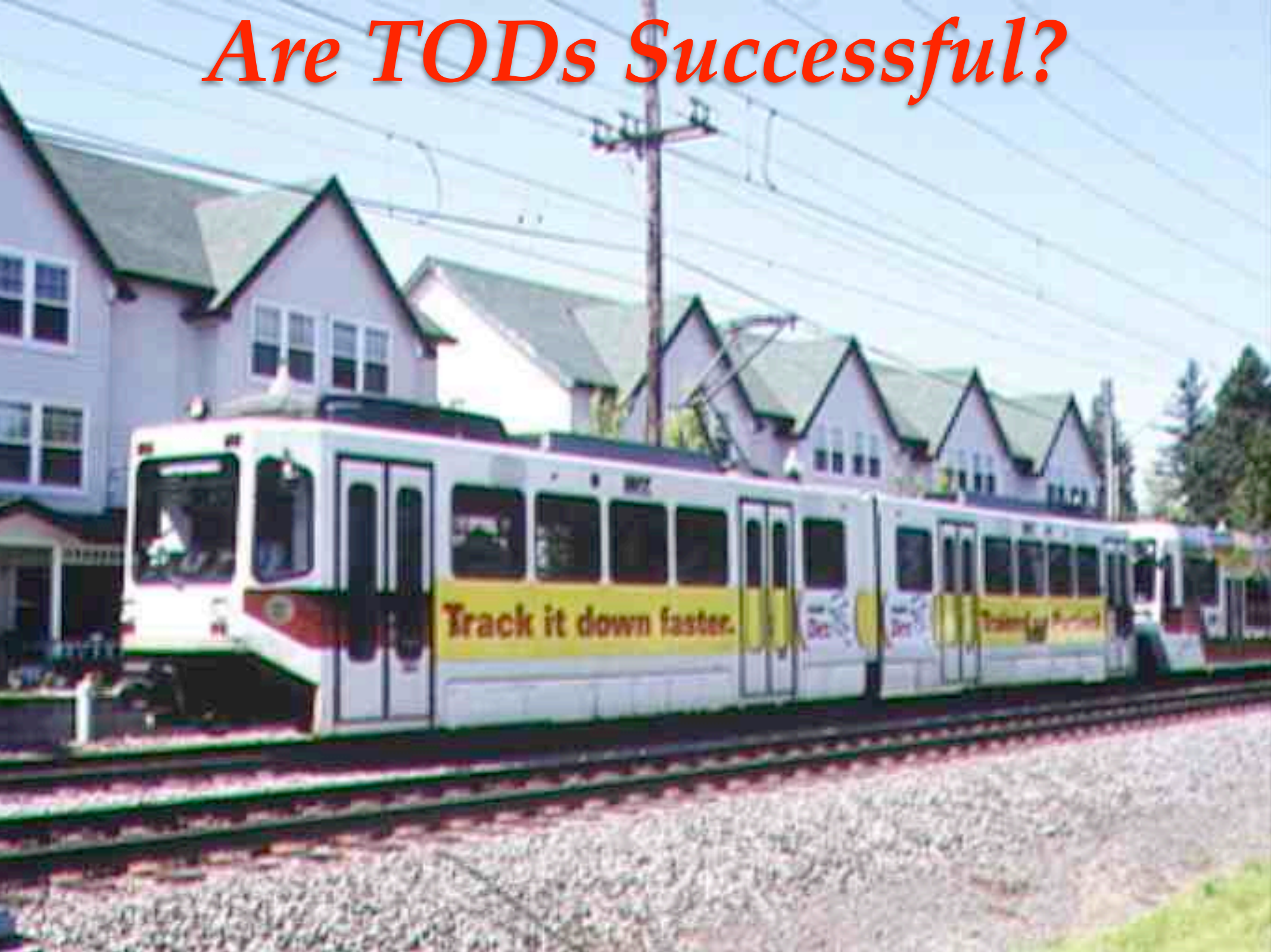
■ Some transit agencies are rethinking transit development as a strategy for enhancing revenue and ridership. Staff need formulas and guidelines for transit development.

“Urban rail transit investments rarely ‘create’ new growth, but more typically redistribute growth that would have taken place without the investment.”

Cervero & Seskin, FTA Report #TCRP-7

At best, it leads development that would have taken place anyway to locate in one part of town instead of another -- which makes it a zero-sum game. But it is actually a negative-sum game because of the subsidies that everyone has to pay for a few property owners to gain.

Are TODs Successful?



Another myth is that Portland transit-oriented developments are working.



Here is a failed transit oriented development in the former East German city of Halle-Neustadt.



Here is a similar development in Portland.



Once East Germans got their freedom, they moved out -- many to single-family homes -- and this development is slated for destruction.



Portland's urban-growth boundary has driven up the cost of land and housing and forced people who would otherwise buy a single-family home to live in places like this. But how transit-oriented is it?



This particular development has only .65 official parking spaces per dwelling unit. So the cars you saw parked in the last slide are parking in a fire lane.



These cars are parked on the sidewalk marked by the red line. The managers of this development know that if they enforce the parking rules people will move out.



Another transit-oriented development was planned on the light-rail line to the airport. Nothing was built for years after the line opened, but the light-rail cars dutifully stopped at the stations every day.



Finally, after years of nothing happening, Portland rezoned the area for big-box stores



Including IKEA. The development has well over 1,000 parking spaces, as few shoppers are likely to carry their IKEA furniture home on the light rail.



This is supposed to be a mixed-use development with apartments on the upper floors and shops on the ground floor.

FOR LEASE



**NORRIS
BEGGS &
SIMPSON**
REALTORS



(503) 223-7181

However, almost all the ground-floor shops are vacant because planners didn't provide parking to support retail shops.



There is a large parking lot for the light-rail station, but parking is reserved for light-rail riders.

PORTLAND, OREGON

2001 PULITZER PRIZE WINNER FOR PUBLIC SERVICE

35c

Drugs are on the move on MAX

Police note that dealers have latched onto Fareless Square stops and the rides between them as fruitful places for sales

By JOSEPH ROSE
THE OREGONIAN

The dealer lingered in the shadows of a MAX platform under the Burnside Bridge. In one of his jeans pockets, \$7 packets of heroin rubbed against a trading card-size picture of the Virgin Mary.

Finding a buyer for the drugs was as easy as waiting for trains to stop and unload riders every few minutes.

Busting the seller was just as easy for an undercover cop posing as a street kid on a recent night. Step off the MAX. Make eye contact. Within two minutes, the dealer was in handcuffs.

"The frustrating thing is there are three more guys in the wings, ready to take his place," said transit police Sgt. John Harrison as he watched a patrol car take the dealer away.

Every day, from just before sunrise to several hours after dark, the same frustration waits at MAX stops along Fareless Square, say officers who patrol the free-



Light rail and streetcars are actually good for some businesses, but they aren't the kind of businesses you want in your neighborhood.



Portland's mayor, Sam Adams, says it is his goal to house all of the 300,000 people who are expected to move to Portland's population in the next few decades in high-density developments along the streetcar and light-rail lines.



Is Light Rail “Green”?

Transit officials love to claim that transit is more environmentally friendly than cars.



Light rail does use a little less energy, per passenger mile, than cars, but it must be supported by feeder buses that use far more energy per passenger mile than cars. On average, then, transit uses about the same energy per passenger mile as cars.



Building light rail, however, uses huge amounts of energy. The environmental impact statement for the Expo light-rail line estimated that the energy costs of construction would be 170 times the annual energy savings.



If you want to reduce greenhouse gases using renewable electricity, trolley buses make more sense than light rail because they don't require the energy-intensive infrastructure.



Plug-in hybrids and electric cars make even more sense because they can be recharged overnight, when the demand for electricity is low, while light rail uses electricity during the day, when the demand is high.



Is Light Rail Affordable?

Some people claim that the savings from operating light rail will pay the cost of constructing it. In fact, Portland only built light rail because it was expensive.



In 1973, Congress allowed cities to cancel interstate freeways and use the money for transit capital improvements. When Portland cancelled the Mt. Hood Freeway, it could have used the money to buy new buses.



But TriMet didn't have enough money to operate a lot of new buses, so it decided to build light rail because it would consume all of the capital costs freed up by the cancelled freeway without greatly adding to operating costs.

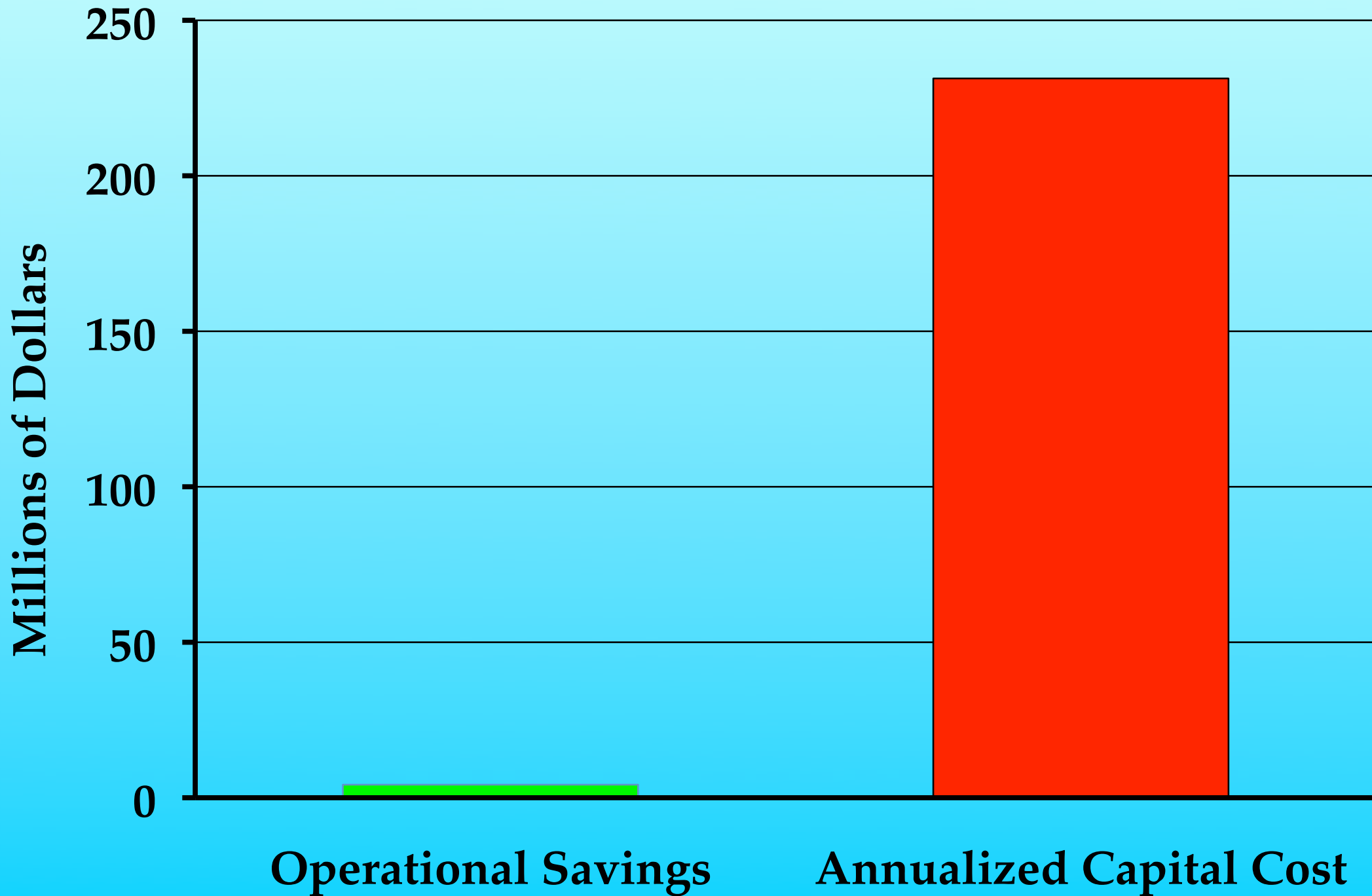


As it turned out, due to cost overruns, light rail cost even more than the Mt. Hood Freeway, yet a mile of Portland's light rail carries less than a fifth as many people as a single freeway lane-mile.



Portland's second light-rail line was originally projected to cost about \$250 million but ended up costing nearly \$1 billion, thanks to an expensive tunnel.

Operational Savings vs. Capital Cost



I estimate that substituting buses for light rail would add about \$4 million to TriMet's operating costs, but would save well over \$220 million in annualized capital costs.



Plus you have replace light-rail tracks, wires, and other infrastructure about every 30 years, which means you never stop paying for it.



If you don't, you get accidents like this one, which killed 9 people on the Washington Metro system and was caused by maintenance failures when the system was more than 30 years old.



Portland is partly paying for light rail and transit-oriented developments out of tax-increment financing, which means money that would otherwise have gone to fire, police, schools, and other urban services goes to developers instead.



Portland fire and police have seen numerous budget cuts.



Portland's school district has major shortfalls in its annual budget and is closing 4 to 6 schools a year.



**“Who needs
police precincts
and housing
inspectors in
times like these,
anyway?”**

*Jack Bogdanski,
law professor and
bojack.org blogger*

Even Portland's building inspection department has been cut. But, as bojack suggests, the city's priorities are to support developers rather than police and other urban services.



Policy Analysis

No. 596

July 9, 2007

Routing

Debunking Portland The City That Doesn't Work

by Randal O'Toole

Executive Summary

Though many people consider Portland, Oregon, a model of 21st-century urban planning, the region's integrated land-use and transportation plans have greatly reduced the area's livability. To halt urban sprawl and reduce people's dependence on the automobile, Portland's plans use an urban-growth boundary to greatly increase the area's population density, spend most of the region's transportation funds on various rail transit projects, and promote construction of scores of

move to Vancouver, Washington, and other cities outside the region's authority. Far from reducing driving, rail transit has actually reduced the share of travel using transit from what it was in 1980. And developers have found that so-called transit-oriented developments only work when they include plenty of parking.

Portland-area residents have expressed their opposition to these plans by voting against light rail and density and voting for a property-rights

You can read more about Portland and Portland's rail system in this report downloadable from cato.org.



WHY WE'RE STUCK IN TRAFFIC
AND WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT

GRIDLOCK

RANDAL O'TOOLE

You can also read more about transportation planning in this book published by the Cato Institute.

*The Vanishing
Automobile
and Other Urban Myths*



**How Smart Growth Will
Harm American Cities**
Randal O'Toole

This book also has an extensive critique of Portland's land-use and transportation planning.

The Antiplanner

Welcome to the Antiplanner

[Home](#)[About](#)[RSS](#)

About the Antiplanner

The antiplanner has more than thirty years experience critiquing plans written by a wide variety of federal, state, and local government agencies.

Calendar

December 2006

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
					1	2
4	5	6	7	8	9	
11	12	13	14	15	16	
18	19	20	21	22	23	
25	26	27	28	29	30	

Welcome to the Antiplanner

posted in [Mission, Why Planning Fails](#) | [Edit](#) |

They say someone starts a new blog every second, so let me present one of the first 80,000 blogs of 2007. *The Antiplanner* is the public face of my new mission: to promote the repeal of all federal and state planning laws and the closure of all state and local planning offices.

While people often blame social problems on politicians or lawyers, I have concluded that many of our problems are due to planners and the elected officials who support them. In a nutshell, planners do two things: they create shortages of things that people want and surpluses of things that people don't want.

Of course, everybody plans. We plan our work day, our vacations, our education and careers. But these plans tend to be short term, flexible, and affect mainly ourselves and our families. To distinguish this from the planning I criticize, I prefer to call such activities *organizing*: we organize our time and resources as efficiently as we can based on what we know. If

1st
January
2007

Subscribe

[rss posts](#)[rss comments](#)

Spread the Word

[delicious](#)[digg](#)[technorati](#)[reddit](#)[magnolia](#)[stumbleupon](#)[yahoo](#)[google](#)

My daily blog also frequently comments on Portland and rail transit. Just Google "antiplanner" and I'll be the first thing on the list.



For even more information, I invite you to Orlando this June 10-12



*Preserving the American
Dream Conference*

Defending Mobility and Homeownership

*June 10-12, 2010
Orlando, Florida*

where the American Dream Coalition will hold its annual meeting on the future of American mobility and homeownership.

For more information:

Web sites:

ti.org

cato.org

americandreamcoalition.org

e-mail: rot@ti.org

*For e-mail updates, give me
your e-mail address*

You can get more information from these web sites. If you are interested in receiving free email updates, simply give me your card or email address.