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Opinion

Sound Transit light rail bound to kill people, ram cars in Rainier Valley - But agency has a strategy to evade responsibility for it

GUEST COLUMNIST/Emory Bundy

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When Sound Transit's Initial Segment light rail starts running through Rainier Valley, on Martin Luther King Jr. Way, there will be recurrent collisions and occasional deaths. Sound Transit is fully aware of this. Its environmental impact statement predicts 32 annual collisions-one every 12 days. Based on experience in other cities, this suggests approximately eight deaths per decade. It may be worse.

Sound Transit says it will take every precaution to minimize deaths and injuries. But it has refused to take the one precaution that would work-not have a non-grade-separated railroad line, especially not one running through an urban neighborhood. Here are a pair of examples to illustrate the predictable consequences of this irresponsible conduct:

Los Angeles runs a light rail line, also non-grade-separated-which means it is not separated by tunneling, an overhead alignment, or fenced-off. It travels through a similar urban neighborhood, though on a longer and more densely settled route. In its first decade of service there were 60 fatalities, six per year on average. The LA Metropolitan Transit Authority has taken aggressive safety and public education measures over the years, and the rate of car/train collisions has dropped from approximately 50 to 30 per year. People are killed at a lesser rate, but still there are multiple deaths most years.

A non-grade-separated light rail line began service in downtown Houston, Jan. 1, 2004. It already has had 39 collisions, one every fourth day, on average. Fifteen of the collisions caused injuries, but mercifully, there

have been no fatalities-yet.

These episodes and tragedies are embarrassing for those agencies, so they do all they can to minimize the occasions of their embarrassment. But the fundamental error is inherent to the projects-the mistake of running a massive, steel-on-steel, slow-stopping behemoth through urban neighborhoods, on a demanding time schedule. Deaths and injuries are the result. It ought not be allowed-nor would such a dangerous amenity be installed, if either Sound Transit, or the City of Seattle, had regard for the safety and welfare of the people, and especially the children, who live near Martin Luther King Jr. Way.

In contrast, the City of Seattle is showing overdue concern for the safety of people in northwest Seattle. The Post-Intelligencer recently featured articles about the recurrent tragedies near Golden Gardens, where seven people, most of them teenagers, have been killed by trains in the past decade. Last October Seattle paid \$750,000 to settle a claim from Nicole DeBerge, who was struck at Golden Gardens 10 years ago, leaving her a paraplegic. She offered some of her settlement money to the city to help pay for a fence, to prevent future tragedies. Seattle spurned her offer. Six months later, with the death of yet another teenager, Kali Fuda, age 18, the city is pressing Burlington Northern Santa Fe to install a fence, and offered to help pay for it. Simultaneous with this belated concern and action, the City of Seattle, led by Mayor Greg Nickels, is promoting a more dangerous line right through a southeast Seattle neighborhood.

The BNSF Golden Gardens corridor has no road crossings, and averages 40 trains per day. Initial Segment light rail will run 272 trains per day along Martin Luther King Jr. Way, crossing 18 automotive intersections, 10 designated crosswalks, with unfenced track providing endless opportunities for pedestrians to cross elsewhere. And they will, for the same reasons people jaywalk. Children don't always obey the rules, and juveniles trespass on the BNSF tracks at Golden Gardens. For kids who live near Martin Luther King Jr. Way, the location of their schools, playgrounds, friends' homes and shopping may require them to cross the tracks on a regular basis. Those kids will be faced with those 272 daily trains when Initial Segment starts operating-and if ridership develops as Sound Transit hopes, the agency intends to increase the size and frequency of its life-threatening monsters.

Under federal rail safety regulations, Sound Transit must certify that there will be no more than one death every one million hours of operation-a standard it cannot meet, or even come close to meeting. But rather than provide a grade-separated rail line, which could meet that standard, Sound Transit has created a novel way to evade responsibility for the accidents that it will engender. Its friends in the Federal Transit Administration have sanctioned its subterfuge, the same ones who winked at its misrepresented costs. Sound Transit contends the accidents that will inevitably occur are non-chargeable. That is, it will blame the victims, claim the accidents therefore don't count, and trust the courts will let it escape liability. It will declare that its trains have the right-of-way, it will post signs and signals, and it will tell people to be careful-all things that Los Angeles and Houston have done. When the inevitable tragedies occur, Greg Nickels and Joni Earl and Ron Sims will shrug their shoulders and say, "It's THEIR fault," and blame those killed and maimed for being careless.

Another, less tragic outcome of Initial Segment will be a severe worsening of congestion in Rainier Valley. With 18 crossings of east/west traffic, and 272 trains per day, everyone traveling there will have to wait, over and over and over. Emergency vehicles will be slowed, and sometimes blocked. In the fine print of the environmental impact statement it was revealed that the waiting time at those intersections will be markedly extended. A number of them will be degraded to category F-the worst, with the longest, most maddening delays.

A train in its place is one thing. A train running right through a neighborhood is a killer.

Emory Bundy is a lifelong Seattle resident. He attended John Muir Elementary School and lived three blocks from the site of Sound Transit's planned station at McClellan Street. As director of public affairs for King Broadcasting Company he won many national awards for television productions, and subsequently directed the work of the Bullitt Foundation. He is retired.

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