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The busway to nowhere

The airport busway is another PAT folly that must be halted

On Oct. 27, Port Authority Transit broke ground for the Airport Busway, and their plans include replacing the old, long gone Wabash Bridge with a new span across the Monongahela River. Unfortunately, supporters of the project have failed to learn some critical lessons from past mistakes, and thus the region may be doomed to repeat them. Worse, this may foreclose any chances for a less expensive, direct, high-speed link between the city and the airport.

The original Wabash Bridge was built in 1903-04 by Jay Gould, a financier who overextended himself building the bridge and the rail line it carried. When completed, many thought the route would open areas for "development," but it failed. In the end, it was deemed "Gould's Folly."

In 1948, the bridge was razed, melted down and reincarnated as the Dravosburg Bridge, now called the Mansfield Bridge. (That finale has a personal connection: my father, the late L. Ernest Tessitor, was in full charge of design and construction for the latter bridge while he was chief engineer and head of Allegheny County's Bridge Department from 1946 to 1952.)

By the end of the 1960s, the county was dreaming of Skybus — an automated, elevated, rubber-tired transit system, forerunner to the people mover at the airport. In the early 1970s, \$25 million was spent to initiate construction of a Skybus route through the Wabash Tunnel. Then it was exposed that there was no effective way for Skybus to switch between tracks. Amid great uproar, deputy Secretary of PennDOT Ed Tennyson refused to sign for the release of any more funds, and Skybus was dead.

Now we have the Airport Busway, and for myriad reasons it stands to be the latest folly. Several important facts have escaped the public's attention:

- *The overall design is ill-conceived.* Pittsburgh City Council has complained and is withholding an easement needed for the busway's new Mon bridge, because of the convoluted design for the South Side and Downtown connections. But the Busway is equally contorted along its route, wrapping up, over and under a railroad which must be relocated. Its Parkway West interchange and final terminus in Carnegie each repeat the rollercoaster design style.

- *The busway project offers little help for traffic problems.* PAT expects that "approx-

imately 232 autos may be diverted from the Fort Pitt Bridge in the a.m. peak hour." The total bus and auto traffic likely to be diverted amounts to 1½ to 2½ percent of the 144,000 vehicles using the bridge daily.

- *Building the new Mon bridge adds another whole year or more to Parkway closings.* In order for the busway bridge to meet Fort Pitt Boulevard at Market Street, the existing eastbound Parkway lanes must be relocated to the wharf level. This will require totally closing that section of road for at least one year before the scheduled closings of the Fort Pitt Bridge. Traffic hassles will thus span three or more years, rather than being over in months — as could happen without the new bridge if PennDOT would completely close the bridge and repair it in both directions at the same time.

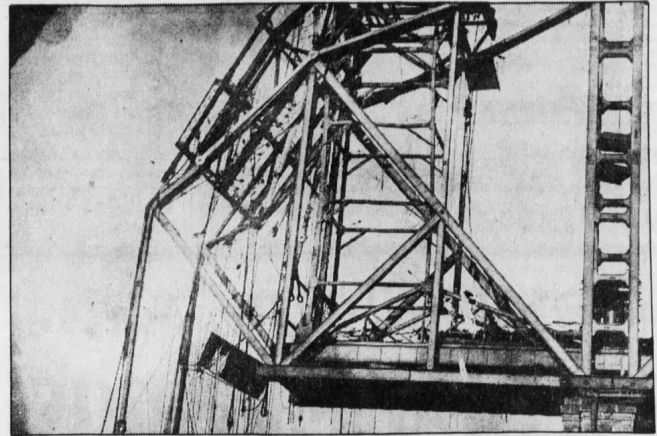
- *The new bridge will handle minimal traffic.* The expected daily total (in and out combined) is less than 3,800 auto and bus trips. This could be readily accommodated by dedicating a reversing lane for HOV use on the refurbished Smithfield Street Bridge.

- *Parking will be harder Downtown.* The bridge will eliminate 1,057 parking spaces between the Mon Wharf and Station Square areas. This will increase pressure to tear down buildings for additional surface parking, a practice still allowed under auxiliary uses. Mayor Murphy says the city is facing a parking crunch and needs thousands of spaces in new parking garages. These must be paid for by someone. Have these replacement costs been considered part of the busway costs? No.

- *Congestion will be increased Downtown as environmental quality decreases.* "Over 660 additional buses daily" will ply the downtown. Meanwhile, PAT can't figure out what to do with the current buses which clog the streets. People are dissuaded from shopping Downtown partly because of the bus problem. Now PAT wants to add significantly more buses.

- *Rail would better serve the Crafton-Ingram and Carnegie areas.* PAT points out that, "The corridor was formerly served by rail transit with numerous station stops." This line could be rehabilitated for about one-third the cost of the busway (and would reduce bus traffic on downtown streets instead of adding to it). These older transit-oriented communities were once fine rail suburbs, so why couldn't they be again?

- *The HOV is of questionable benefit.*



The Wabash Bridge got off to a bad start with an Oct. 1903 accident that killed 10.

PAT says that the Wabash HOV is expected to "attract 2,211 people in 644 carpools" daily. "Time savings would be modest in the morning peak — on the order of three minutes — for HOVs traveling from most of the South Hills." National studies indicate that HOV lanes are not very successful. Their use projections are seldom met, and their effectiveness is regularly diluted by reducing requirements from 3 to 2 occupants.

- *HOV use on the busway portion is inappropriate.* Despite PAT's protests, PennDOT would only agree to approve the busway if the busway-only portion would be open for HOV use during the Fort Pitt Bridge work. Untrained drivers are thus to use a two-way Berry Street Tunnel that will be a little wider than the Mount Washington tunnel — a facility restricted to trained drivers at 15 mph.

- *The price keeps going up.* The original estimated cost in 1989 was \$43 million. The estimated cost is now \$317.36 million, an increase of 738 percent, and this still does not reflect final land acquisition costs or extensive environmental work likely to be needed. The busway route has several steep, rockfall-prone slopes. Major grading to make the road surface safer for cars and buses would add significantly to the current estimate.

- *PAT has failed to meet federal law and state and federal regulations.* These require a reasonable evaluation of alternatives. Across the country, metropolitan areas have concluded that rail is the optimum mode for transit, typically attracting twice as many riders as buses, with or without busways. PAT, however, is a bus company that has been beleaguered with problems on its one mismanaged rail line,

and its dislike of rail is no secret.

PAT rejected light rail from the outset, saying it would "cost two to three times as much." They have said this so often that everyone has come to believe them. However, in my investigation I have found that no cost analysis was ever done, an omission which conveniently avoided contradiction of PAT's dismissive assertion. My colleagues and I have since conducted a preliminary analysis using industry sources which reveals exactly the opposite — the relative cost for rail would be one-half to one-third as much for the same route!

- *And finally, the Airport Busway doesn't even go to the airport.* It goes to Carnegie, less than half way to the airport. For a price tag comparable to the busway's, the region could actually have a direct link. A 100-plus mph rail line between the airport, Station Square and the Mon Valley could whisk travelers from the city right into the airport terminal building in only 10 minutes. As part of a regional rail network, this link could help bring economic health back into the region's older depressed towns, nearly all of which are served by rail.

If the Airport Busway is built, we won't be able to get money for an eminently better project. This would be worse than temporarily losing any of the appropriated funding.

There are grounds for a legal challenge and, should one be filed, it could repeat history. In 1931, a late-hour suit managed to stop the county from converting the Wabash Bridge and Tunnel to automobile usage; the basis for the case then was that that proposal, too, was inadequate and misrepresented the true costs.

David Tessitor is chair of E Watch, a citizen environmental group.