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QuickPoint! – WES Is an Energy Hog

By Allison Coleman

In 2009 the regional transit agency, TriMet, opened a commuter rail line running from Wilsonville to Beaverton. The line is known as the Westside Express Service, or WES.

According to transit advocates, commuter rail would help reduce energy consumption in the Portland region because it was assumed that trains moved people more efficiently than private automobiles.

However, the energy efficiency claims about WES turned out to be wrong. WES uses 6,753 BTUs of energy per passenger mile, which is 4,000 more than the national average of all commuter rail lines. WES also uses more than twice the amount of energy as a car to move the same number of passengers. On average, [automobiles consume only 3,122 BTUs](#) per passenger mile, and that number has been dropping steadily since 1970.*

Many transit advocates have been so enthused about commuter rail that they have urged lawmakers to fund an expansion of WES to Salem. Not only would this be costly, it would be a step backwards for energy efficiency. Surprising as it may seem, the average automobile is now far more efficient than commuter rail.

*See http://cta.ornl.gov/data/tedb35/Edition35_Chapter02.pdf, page 2-20, table 2.15.

Allison Coleman is a Research Associate at Cascade Policy Institute, Oregon's free market public policy research organization.