(Published as op ed, Albuquerque Journal, April 6, 2009)

We Albuquerqueños have finally arrived at a point in our history at which we realize that we need more and better transit. This is the good news. The bad news is that, unlike our sister cities all over the North American West, we're still fooling around with partial and obsolete solutions to this problem.

We're still caught in the Bus Trap.

If supposedly All-American (or All-Canadian) car-crazy hotbeds like Calgary, Dallas, Denver, Houston, Phoenix and Salt Lake City can break out of this trap, why can't we?

We need streets. We need cars and trucks for police, fire, emergency, construction, repair and delivery purposes. We need expanded facilities for bicycles, wheelchairs, and feet. And we need busses big and small. But all these by themselves amount to branches without a trunk.

For the massive daily work of moving commuters, students, event-goers and tourists, and of facilitating people-powered transportation, nothing does it like a train. I repeat, a train. There are many reasons this is so. Here are some of them:

—- Fuel/energy economy; 2-3 times that of bus-based transit. This picture gets even prettier when you realize that roads, unlike rails, are themselves made largely out of petroleum products.

—- Long life and low upkeep. A modem rail vehicle lasts at least twice as long as a bus, and similar durability applies to rails vs. roads.

—- Safety, convenience and reliability in all kinds of weather. Though rail systems are not immune to disastrous weather, they "weather" them more easily, and can be returned to service faster and cheaper when they do break down.
—- Wise use of resources. A set of tracks moves 3-4 times the people (or tons of

freight) as does a road using up the same amount of steel,concrete or real estate.

—- **Renewal of city centers** and first-ring suburbs**.** Rail promotes more choices in residential and commercial infrastructure. In other words, rail fIghts sprawl. This may not be good news to everyone, but it is to more and more of us .

—- **No tire disposal problem.** Toxic and flammable tire mountains are becoming a serious world-wide problem and they're not that easy or safe to recycle.

—- **People like trains.** There a problem with that? Thousands will ride a train who won't ride a bus; although oddly enough, implementation of rail transit leads to *increased use of non-rail transit*, if the system is re-routed properly. And any good transit system—-road and rail together—- promotes walking and biking as well.

So what progress are we making toward city rail for Albuquerque?

In the aftermath of the failed 2006 Modem Streetcar initiative, the 21st Century Transportation Task Force (TTF), chaired by Isaac Benton, was convened to study local transportation and related tax policy, and to make recommendations (I was a member). After eight months of twice-monthly meetings, a large majority of us recommended an increase in funding for transit, biking and walking improvements; including but not limited to an improved Modern Streetcar proposal: Improved in that "Streetcar II" would cover a long enough distance (Central from Atrisco to San Mateo) to be the start of a truly city-wide rail transit network.

Our findings were sensible and modest—-hardly an incitment to riot—-yet there they lie, stuck in Albuquerque's nearsighted and contentious politics. Abundant proof exists that rail transit investment (tax money) multiplies four-to eight-fold in various benefits to the public. Rail doesn't cost; it pays. Not for years, but for generations.

Given this high return on public investment, it's a wonder indeed that these cost-effective delights are still widely regarded as a waste of money, a tax-and-spend

fiasco or a liberal bondoggle. Epithets-like these are the equivalent of “Commie” and “Pinko” in transportation discourse.

If anything is more truly Conservative than $4-8 dollars back to the public for every tax dollar spent, I for one have no idea what it is. Add to this the benefits, fmancial and otherwise, of a cleaner environment, greater energy self-sufficiency, better health and more money in your pocket and you have to wonder just who’s responsible for our backwater status in transportation.

One of the big jobs of our political leaders is to invest our tax money in what promises the greatest return, financially and otherwise. Modern Rail is a proven winner in both areas.

Share this:

- Share on X (Opens in new window) X
- Share on Facebook (Opens in new window) Facebook
- Email a link to a friend (Opens in new window) Email
- Share on LinkedIn (Opens in new window) LinkedIn
- Share on Reddit (Opens in new window) Reddit
- Share on Tumblr (Opens in new window) Tumblr
- Share on Pinterest (Opens in new window) Pinterest
- Share on Telegram (Opens in new window) Telegram
- Share on WhatsApp (Opens in new window) WhatsApp