

Donald F Padelford*
Seattle, WA

Remarks to the PSRC Transportation Futures Task Force, 06-24-15

As I stated in materials distributed to you earlier, it seems to me that the central dilemma of this task force is that the region has “a gallon’s worth of need but only a cup’s worth of means.” In other words you need to come up with a way to raise a lot more money in order to fund all the region’s various mobility needs. Cribbing a line from the movie, Jaws, “You’re going to need a bigger cup.”

But are you?

There are two general approaches which I earlier called, by analogy, the Ptolemaic vs the Copernican.

The Ptolemaic approach is that of the bigger cup. Raise sales taxes, property taxes, gas taxes, car registration taxes, roads taxes. Get grants from the federal government. And so forth. Maybe with all those cups, you can raise enough money to bail out the boat. Maybe.

Let’s take transit mobility as an example. We are being asked to come up with \$15 billion dollars to fund the next increment of light rail. Additional increments are inevitable. Let’s say the total ask is in the \$30 billion dollar range. The Ptolemaic approach is to come up with a portfolio of taxes to meet this need. Two things: first, transit mobility is important, and second, this is a **lot** of money.

What I have called the Copernican approach reverses this. Instead of raising revenue to fund a project which, hopefully, will meet at least some of the need, we meet the need, transit mobility, simply by the act of raising the revenue. Under this approach we repurpose the freeway HOV lanes into Transit-Express lanes, which is to say HOT lanes where the bar in terms of who-travels-free is raised high enough that these lanes are never congested, even at the height of rush hours traffic (probably to “vanpools and better”). If we do this and add transit-only lanes to major arterials, then the regional transit mobility issue is largely solved. And we don’t need to spend tens of billions of dollars building out the light rail system (though, of course, if we want to, we can). Two things: first, transit mobility is important, and second, we have just saved the region something like \$30 billion dollars. It’s a start.

I am not saying that this would be an easy thing to achieve politically. But my understanding of this task force is that your charge is not so much to look to the easy political fix as it is to find ways to actually solve the various inter-related problems of regional mobility. This is one such way, which I commend to your examination.

Here I have talked about transit mobility. But the same general principles can be applied to towards freight and personal mobility. These were briefly discussed in the materials distributed to you earlier.

Any questions?

* pronounced “pa.DEL.ford”

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