

The Rev. Phil Skei: A 'Tale of Two Cities' choice

Fresno

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Last month, I, along with hundreds of others, witnessed the Fresno City Council vote 4-3 to return \$50 million in federal and state grants because we have decided we don't want or need Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) in our city.

I listened intently to the important explanations that council members were to give as to why BRT is a bad idea. Here is what I heard: The BRT system doesn't solve all of our transportation issues, the BRT may eventually cost us \$2.3 million each year to maintain if ridership doesn't increase, we should improve the existing Fresno Area Express bus system and not build BRT, and voting against BRT helps undermine a new General Plan Update that some developers and council members don't like.

This kind of discussion is pretty common amongst our city council, so it wasn't surprising to hear such an array of justifications for voting against BRT. While I certainly have thoughts about these particular explanations justifying a vote against BRT, I have a greater concern that went unaddressed throughout the BRT debate.

All I kept thinking was how voting against BRT — which was to start on the Blackstone and Kings Canyon corridors — was a decision to not invest in our own city. More specifically, it was a decision to not invest in the center of our city.

Why is this important? Because with each "justifiable" decision the city council makes to not invest in the center of our city, it reinforces the haunting reality that the story of Fresno is truly a "Tale of Two Cities."

You see, the story of Fresno is told quite differently from the perspective of someone who lives in south Fresno, as compared with someone who lives in north Fresno.

The BRT was not just a decision about improving the transit experience for those who ride the two busiest routes in our city, or increasing the economic vitality along these corridors, or improving air quality, or dozens of other reasons given to support BRT. The decision was also a choice whether or not to reinforce the economic, racial and social divide between north Fresno and south Fresno.

Every time we fail to invest in the center of our city, we reinforce the narrative that we are a "Tale of Two Cities."

For this to change, the Fresno City Council is going to have to begin to make decisions out of a new paradigm. This new paradigm says to us:

Sometimes we make decisions just because they are right. There is a larger vision we are pursuing together, and this larger vision does not include a geographically divided city. Therefore, though we can justify opposing BRT, our explanations are not sufficient enough to justify not making a significant infrastructure investment in the center of our city that will move us toward being more unified.

It always costs more to rebuild than to maintain. The BRT system was being funded by federal and state grants that are designed to subsidize significant infrastructure improvements in cities like Fresno that wouldn't otherwise be able to make these improvements. Our federal and state governments understand the incredible cost of making these infrastructure improvements and so they bear the brunt of this expense.

They leave the more manageable operations and maintenance expenses to the cities. While some believe the potential risk of not being able to cover the estimated \$2.3 million annual operations and maintenance expense in the future is a reason worthy of opposing BRT, the cost to provide an alternative will be much higher in the future — especially when the federal government will likely reject Fresno's future transportation grant applications if the city returns the BRT grant money.

What is ironic about all of this is that no one on the city council desires Fresno to be "two cities." But sometimes we unintentionally play into this narrative when we pass on opportunities to contribute to the rebuilding of the center of our city — because we can find a reason not to.

I am confident the city council members will vote on BRT again in the near future. Next time, I hope they will accept the invitation to lead Fresno into a singular future rather than reinforcing our divided past.

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Read more here: <http://www.fresnobee.com/2014/02/18/3777987/the-rev-phil-skei-a-tale-of-two.html#storylink=cpy>