

Rail For the Valley completes Analysis of Fraser Valley Transit Study

by [John Buker](#), Tuesday, January 11, 2011

Here is our media release:

After years of delays, the B.C. Ministry of Transportation (MoT) recently released its [Fraser Valley Transit Study](#), which examined future transit options for the Fraser Valley. The study is the second major study to be released this fall, the first being the [Leewood-Interurban Report](#). That study, performed by an experienced light rail firm, found an Interurban passenger service could be achieved in the Fraser Valley at relatively low cost due to the already existing track, and recommended early implementation.

Rail For the Valley founder **Dr. John Buker** was outspoken about the new study:

“The Ministry of Transportation may have thought they could fool the media and public, but they still haven’t provided the promised study of a light rail system for the Fraser Valley. They have looked at a heavy rail model and excluded the critical regions of Surrey and Langley. As a result, most of their data on the Interurban is highly inaccurate and of little value. The Leewood-Interurban Report remains the only study of a Valley-wide light rail system, and the ministry’s dressed up report really doesn’t compare to it.”

The most critical flaw in the new Ministry report is that it draws largely on an older 2006 DRL Heavy Rail Commuter study for the majority of its rail data, including cost estimates. This is not at all surprising since BC lacks a light rail industry, and Provincial studies have relied on Heavy Rail consultants who are simply not qualified to undertake a major study of a light rail system. Rail For the Valley recently contacted the independent Light Rail Firm [Leewood Projects of Great Britain](#) for their professional opinion, and to quote:

“The 2006 DRL report has not considered light rail in its evidence, the rail option is very



firmly based on the Heavy Rail/Heavy DMU mode.” - David Cockle, Leewood Projects Ltd.

The Ministry report extrapolates costs from the 2006 DRL Commuter Rail report to arrive at a rough capital cost estimate of \$18.6 million/km for track repairs and upgrades needed for a light rail service.

- The DRL analysis on which these capital costs are based include extensive re-working, double-tracking and other elaborate expenditures on a small section of Interurban track in Surrey to make it suitable for a West Coast Express-style Heavy Rail service. **The study crudely extrapolates this cost to the entire 98 km length of track, without any actual analysis of the track, and assumes — falsely — the light rail cost to be the same as the DRL estimate, resulting in a grossly inflated cost.** The independent [Leewood-Interurban report](#) of September 2010 in fact **did** perform a track analysis, and made it very clear the DRL options were unnecessary for light rail and that a far more affordable system achieving the same basic level of service can be built. The Leewood report found capital costs for an Interurban light rail service would be about \$5 million/km including vehicles, *a quarter the cost assumed in the Ministry report*, and this is similar to an earlier [UMA Report by the City of Surrey](#) estimate of \$6 million/km.
- The capital cost of initially building the system

was included in the annual cost analysis for Rail options as a yearly repayment amortized over 30 years. **In contrast, road construction and maintenance costs are not included in the analysis of bus options, resulting in a completely misleading comparison between the two modes of transport.**

- The total Capital cost of the entire project would be cost-shared by all three levels of government, with about a third of the cost shared by the affected municipalities (Delta, Surrey, Langley, Abbotsford, & Chilliwack). It is extremely misleading to compare the **total capital cost of the project** without cost sharing to the annual Abbotsford-Chilliwack FVRD transit budget.

The report exhibits an extreme bias in making the case for 'Express' Buses over Light Rail.

*A stark example of this bias: Projected boardings per day for daily Interurban service between **Abbotsford** and **Chilliwack** is put at a maximum of **250 passengers**. [6800 daily boardings for a hypothetical Chilliwack-Surrey Interurban service, minus 6550 boardings for the same shorter Abbotsford-Surrey service, gives an upper bound on the number of passengers travelling between Abbotsford and Chilliwack, Table 3.17, Foundation Paper #4]*

*However, when the report looks at the equivalent "Express Bus" service between **Abbotsford** and **Chilliwack**, with the same travel time (30 minutes) and the same frequency of service as the Rail service (30/60 minutes peak/off-peak), a very different number is arrived at: **800 boardings**. [Table 3.6, Foundation Paper #4]*

Buker summed up the comparison: "By digging a little under the surface, one discovers shockingly that the report is actually assuming a regional bus service would attract more than

triple the number of passengers of an equivalent light rail service. That's more than a little hard to believe given that there are few cases where buses attract equal let alone greater ridership. If the Fraser Valley can support hourly bus service, or even half-hourly bus service, it can also support light rail, whose operating costs over the lifetime of the vehicles tend to actually be lower, when all costs are taken into account."

While there are positive ideas presented of enhanced local bus service within the study, the hard truth is that ridership will not be high enough to sustain these types of services without a light rail backbone, particularly in places where just 1% of the population uses bus transit. The Ministry study is reactive "rubber tire" planning that in fact promotes urban sprawl, while light rail encourages sustainable growth along the corridor and attracts new riders who choose to leave their cars at home or at a station.

The many errors in the data and conclusions of this report are simply too numerous to list. For the most part, the new study is exactly what was always expected, highly polished and designed simply to discredit light rail, and push Victoria's agenda for rapid bus implementation for the Fraser Valley.

Although the study claims to look at the long-term plans of municipalities in the Valley, these long term plans will naturally be adjusted when Interurban rail is implemented. Surrey Council has already passed a resolution ([Dec. 13 Council meeting, Section C.5.b](#)) adding the Interurban to their Official Community Plan as a long-term growth corridor in anticipation of a passenger service. Other Councils are expected to follow, but **the study crucially does not take any of this into account.**

"Despite the findings of this report, the momentum toward Interurban light rail continues to build."

-Dr. John Buker, Rail For the Valley