

Editorial Comment Transit Aug. 16, 1980
'They' Have Done It, Again

MARTA

SMALL WONDER that Memphians get confused, sometimes.

For 10 years or so they've seen their city struggle without reward in an effort to build a companion hotel to the Cook Convention Center. Over that same period, they have seen new downtown convention hotels go up in Atlanta, New Orleans, Dallas, Louisville, Nashville and everywhere.

A litany of developmental problems in the central city and a roller-coaster economy plagued the Memphis project, but those other cities aren't on the moon. They're right here in the USA where the problems are common.

Now, there is another example of this city being told that something won't work here which does work there.

The Memphis Area Transit Authority's long-range transportation study ruled out the feasibility of innovating any limited rail services or building new rail transit facilities here. Consultants found the problems of using existing tracks insurmountable and the costs of new rail construction prohibitive. The Southern Railway corridor could not or would not accommodate commuter trains, and Memphis lacked the population densities to justify the price, they said.

But San Diego decided it wanted a new light rail trolley line linking its downtown area with the Mexican border at Tijuana. Officials fooled around with the federal government for a while, talking about a \$2-billion, 70-mile rapid rail system, but found that the Urban Mass Transportation Administration would decide that San Diego didn't have sufficient population density to warrant new rail transit.

So San Diego put up some money of its own, won some help from the state of Cali-

fornia and has just about finished the 14-mile "Tijuana Trolley" at a cost of \$5 million per mile — half what MARTA was told a new system would cost here and far below San Francisco's BART (\$34 million per mile) and Atlanta's MARTA (\$42 million per mile). Said California State Senate President James Mills of federal grants and studies, "By the time they've waltzed you around for six or seven years in alternative studies, they've probably contributed less to the cost of your project than inflation has eaten up."

AND IN DENVER, the Colorado Regional Transportation District board of directors has just approved two segments of the city's first light rail transportation system, including a leg from downtown running along existing railroad tracks.

Frustrating, isn't it?

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