

Monorail's End Fast-Tracked  
SMP says it could be out of business by year's end.

by **Rick Anderson**

**The Seattle** Monorail Project (SMP), after spending three years and more than \$200 million to create an elevated transit line for the city, plans to shutter its operations—perhaps by the end of the year—and quietly disappear. Officials, whose most enduring legacy may be an explicit blueprint of how not to build a mass-transit system, say they got the message from the overwhelmingly negative vote on a revised proposal for a new monorail line Tuesday, Nov. 8. They hope to quickly sell agency assets or see that they are transferred to the city or another transit agency.

"No equivocation," said plain-speaking SMP interim Executive Director John Haley, addressing a hastily called news conference Wednesday, Nov. 9, following a 65 percent voter thumbs-down on Proposition 1. "Based on what happened yesterday . . . [this is] the death of a viable urban transportation project." He and monorail staff members are already formulating "a very quick strategy to dispose of the assets," including more than \$60 million in land and right-of-way. An "absolute minimum" of staffers will be retained to close shop, he said, predicting they'll all be gone by New Year's Day, 2006. "Write what you want to write," Haley told reporters. "Resolutely, expeditiously. . . . We're going quickly."

If the time schedule is met, two newly elected monorail board members might not get to take office in 2006. Beth Goldberg beat incumbent Cindi Laws Tuesday and Jim Nobles beat incumbent Cleve Stockmeyer, both by comfortable margins. However, Stockmeyer said Wednesday he'd like to see the project move more slowly toward dissolution and noted he prefers that assets go to the city of Seattle rather than Sound Transit.

A reluctant Kristina Hill, the monorail's acting board chair, said it was so close—"we were within two months of being able to build a monorail," she insisted—and while she conceded that project directors made mistakes, she said she was "dumbfounded" by the lack of support from City Hall. In particular, she said, Mayor Greg Nickels had begun to "bully people as if he was after your milk money." But she now accepts the will of the voters, she said, adding, "I don't believe" another monorail project will soon rise in Seattle. Haley, who thought media reports led to the "trivialization of the project," concurred. "I don't share the optimism [of some monorail supporters] of a [mass] transit project in this corridor. It's dead."

In practical terms, the elevated mass-transit dream for Seattle's western corridor ended in a collision with financial reality—an abbreviated 10.6-mile line from West Seattle to Interbay, possibly costing \$7 billion in future dollars and interest, that voters found unfeasible. That was a scaled-back Plan B after rejection of an original 13.7-mile proposal that could have cost a stunning \$1 billion a mile. The monorail property proceeds will be used to pay off the agency's \$110 million debt and perhaps shorten the time that a motor vehicle excise tax will have to be collected from Seattle car owners, officials said. (Some property still in legal dispute could remain in its owners' hands). "We'll try to match the tax to the debt once we sell the land," said Hill, indicating the tax duration could be shortened or the tax itself lowered.