

Foes try to puncture Red Line claims

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February 28, 2016

Opponents of the city's proposed Red Line bus rapid transit system have mounted an information counteroffensive.

The latest salvo is a study Red Line foes commissioned that asserts ridership on the electric bus system would be unlikely to be as high as transportation planners predict and would slow down thousands more drivers than the number of bus passengers it would help.

The study, by a researcher at [the Cato Institute](#), a libertarian think tank in Washington, D.C., questions many claims of Red Line proponents about how many riders will take the buses; how much economic activity they will generate around the route; and how much they will ease traffic congestion. Cato senior fellow Randal O'Toole says too few jobs exist Downtown to make the line cost efficient. He said the city would be better served by running standard, gas-powered buses more frequently than investing millions of dollars into new electric buses, station platforms and dedicated lanes.

"If you don't have at least 80,000 to 100,000 jobs in the downtown business district, I don't recommend spending very much at all on mass transit," O'Toole said.

About 73,000 people work in Downtown Indianapolis, 8 percent of the metropolitan Indianapolis workforce, said O'Toole, citing figures gathered by urban planner Wendell Cox of St. Louis. That number is much fewer than cities with advanced mass transportation systems. Chicago, for example, has 500,450 downtown jobs. Philadelphia has 239,625, according to Cox's data.

But Cox admittedly uses a "tighter" definition of central business districts than some other economic analysts. Steve Lamont, senior vice president for Commercial Real Estate Services said the number of full-time jobs in what Indianapolis considers downtown — a 4 square mile area — is 134,000.

An additional 137,000 jobs are within a half-mile of the Red Line, said Sean Northrup, assistant executive director at the Metropolitan Planning Organization.

"It's not just employers Downtown who will benefit; it's up and down the line at universities, hospitals and other businesses," Northrup said.

Local transportation planners estimate Red Line will add thousand of riders a day to the IndyGo bus system because it will increase dependability and speed. They also forecast that businesses and residents will want to move near the route, which could boost ridership.

O'Toole, who calls himself the "anti-planner," is a noted critic of spending big money on mass transportation. He testified twice against a light rail plan that was before the Indiana General Assembly. At the urging of Americans for Prosperity, a grass-roots group funded by billionaire industrialists David and Charles Koch, the rail was removed from the enabling legislation that cleared the way for a bus rapid transit system in Indianapolis.

Lifelong north side resident Lee Lange contacted O'Toole to ask for the study. She said a "group," but not Americans for Prosperity, recommended she get in touch with O'Toole. She offered to pay for the study, but O'Toole has not asked for any money, Lange said.

"I'm not opposed to mass transit, but we need to initiate a robust discussion to talk about whether this plan makes the most sense," Lange said.

Lange manages a commercial building on College Avenue and said tenants are concerned that reconfiguring the street for the Red Line would disrupt their business during and after construction, as well as reduce parking spaces.

The commissioning of the study was separate from the activities of another group of Red Line opponents, called CollegeAvenueIndy.org, which has circulated an online petition and bought billboard space at 54th Street and College.

The proposed Red Line is a 37-mile bus service from Carmel to Greenwood that would run in dedicated lanes and stop at raised station platforms. The first phase to be built would be nearly 14 miles from 66th Street in Broad Ripple to the University of Indianapolis on Hannah Street. Some of the exclusive-use lanes and platforms would be in the center of College, and left turns would be prohibited from College to several side streets.

The U.S. Department of Transportation recently recommended a \$75 million grant for Indianapolis that would pay the bulk of the \$96 million first phase. Construction could begin next year if Congress approves the appropriation.

O'Toole said the city could improve its bus system just as much by simply running more buses — since reliability is what commuters demand most — and that dedicated lanes aren't needed. "They are slight improvement (in bus speeds) but hardly worth the investment," he said.

He does favor station platforms, because they speed boarding, but he views the more expensive electric buses as a waste of money. Plus, O'Toole says, more fossil fuels are burned to make the electricity that powers the buses than the amount gas that conventional buses burn.

James Corless, director of the Washington, D.C., pro-mass transit group [Transportation for America](http://TransportationforAmerica), said running dozens of diesel buses every hour along the route would be an environmental disaster.

"People around these transportation corridors need clean, quiet buses," he said. "Breathing diesel fumes are very bad for the heart and lungs."

Dedicated lanes, Corless said, convey reliability.

“Lack of reliability is one of transit’s biggest problems,” Corless said. “People want to know that the buses will take the same amount of time every trip and come at the same time every day. Dedicated lanes help do that. When people see a permanent public infrastructure, it tells them that the government is investing in it and that you can rely on it. It also tells business that they can invest there, because the city is.”

The city’s transportation agency, IndyGo, said business would sprout up along the line and people would want to live near it, spurring residential development, as well.

O’Toole said that isn’t true.

“Anyone who says that is either lying or deluded,” O’Toole said. “There is no evidence that happens.”

A 126-page peer-reviewed study by the National Institute for Transit Communities at Portland State University found that bus rapid transit has spurred growth in some cities.

“To an important extent, the market appears to respond to BRT investments,” the study said. “Where they improve access to employment centers along routes and where there are opportunities for redevelopment, BRT systems appear to facilitate economic development.”

The researchers looked at systems in Cleveland, Kansas City, Pittsburgh and Phoenix, among others.

The Institute for Transit and Policy Development, a transit-promoting organization, in a 2013 study estimated that Cleveland’s \$50 million BRT, called Healthwise, has generated \$6 billion in economic development, \$114 for every dollar invested.

North side resident Lange, however, said development on College is proceeding fine without the Red Line.

“I believe in organic business growth, and that’s what has been happening at 49th Street, 52nd and 54th for years now,” she said. The Red Line, she said, has the potential to displace businesses.

“Peoples’ livelihoods are at stake here,” she said. “There doesn’t seem to be a lot to gain from this investment.”