



Officials blast critique of UTA mass transit

By Tom Busselberg
June 12, 2014

BOUNTIFUL - An analysis of mass transit by a major think tank that includes UTA's FrontRunner and Trax, was blasted by local officials, including a Davis County commissioner.

The "policy analysis" was conducted by the Cato Institute, and was entitled, "The Worst of Both: The Rise of High-Cost, Low-Capacity Rail Transit."

It was comparing light rail, so-called heavy rail and buses, and said heavy rail costs far more to build than light rail, but can transport more people.

It noted that UTA chose to build more light rail, along with such cities as Dallas and Portland, Ore. It also called "several light rail lines particularly unproductive, including those in Salt Lake City" and other cities including San Jose, Calif., Cleveland, Baltimore and New Jersey.

The study claims a freeway lane can typically move about 2,000 to 2,200 automobile-sized vehicles per hour. It said a single bus stop could handle 42 buses per hour, carrying up to 60 people per bus.

"The figures are misleading. It's not a scientific study," said UTA spokesman Remi Barron. "UTA had the lowest cost per mile of track construction in the country."

He also disputed the ability of buses to carry more passengers, overall. "We'd have to run buses so frequently to match the capacity of a TRAX train. It doesn't make any sense."

County Commissioner Bret Millburn was reached in Louisville, Ky., where he was attending the National Association of Regional Councils convention. He is chair of the Wasatch Front Regional Council, which deals with transportation issues across the Wasatch Front.

"Over the years Utah has been fortunate" to receive federal transportation funds. But the same funding issues are being dealt with now on the federal level as at the state and local levels, he said.

"The buying power just isn't there. With the increased costs of maintaining the systems and a growing demand for new, it's a balancing act on how do you accommodate - how do you pay for it?" Millburn said.

"Statistics can say what you want them to say," he said in response to the Cato study.

”It’s important to note that in Utah, we’re not only building for today, but for the future,” Millburn said. “There may be a difference between rail and bus. When you put rail in, there’s some permanency. We can build some economies around that. You know it won’t be changing from season to season,” as far as service.

He referred to the development of housing and other amenities along rail lines, such as Kays Crossing apartments at the Layton FrontRunner line, which has housing for hundreds of people.

“I don’t dismiss the bus component, but the rail has been put in as a kind of spine. Now we start to add meat to that, infrastructure. We’ll have a robust system,” he said.

Looking at the future, Davis County alone could add more than 100,000 people before build out, Millburn said.

Several bus/mass transit studies are being conducted across the county, such as the South Davis/Salt Lake Corridor study.