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Editorial: Texans value transportation independence

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Several pundits have now remarked that Texas lawmakers seem to be in favor of transportation bills that involve ride-booking apps such as Uber and Lyft, but against the transportation project involving the proposed bullet train from Dallas to Houston.

Well, yes. That's because they're comparing apples to rotten oranges.

For Texans, transportation is a deeply personal issue. We love our cars and trucks, sure, but that's not it. It's the independence that some modes of transportation offer (and this includes Uber and Lyft), and others don't.

The Cato Institute recently observed that this applies to most Americans, as well as Texans.

"In 1964, most transit was privately owned, earned a profit, and was used by the average urban American 60 times a year," Cato reports. "Then Congress passed the Urban Mass Transportation Act, offering capital grants to cities that took over their transit systems. Since then, most transit has been municipalized, we spend nearly \$50 billion a year subsidizing it, and today the average American rides transit just 40 times a year."

Of course, that average American number is misleading; the vast majority of Americans don't use public transportation at all, while in some urban areas, a small minority of Americans use it frequently.

The reasons are clear. First, public transportation is slow.

"Most transit is much slower than driving, and a lot of transit is slower than cycling," Cato explains. "While the average speed of driving in most American cities is more than 30 mph, and in some it is more than 40 mph, the American Public Transportation Association's Public Transportation Fact Book admits that the average speed of rail transit is just 21.5 mph while the average speed of buses is 14.1 mph. That doesn't count the time it takes to get to and from transit stops."

And it's inconvenient - it doesn't go where we need to go.

"Most transit is oriented to downtown, a destination few people go to anymore as less than 8 percent of urban jobs and 1 percent of urban residences are located in central city downtowns," Cato adds. "If you don't want to go downtown, transit is practically useless as hub-and-spoke transit systems can require hours to take you to destinations that are only a few minutes away by car."

Which brings us to the bullet train, a proposed private-sector venture (which would rely heavily on government bringing eminent domain lawsuits against property owners).

Now, high-speed rail sounds wonderful, and many Americans have had positive experiences with rail travel in Europe and Asia. But there are insurmountable reasons why high-speed rail won't work here.

One such reason is the obvious misnomer: high-speed rail usually isn't. To be convenient to most passengers, trains must make lots of stops - they must pick up passengers near where they live, and disgorge them near where they work. But that means the trains can never build up much speed.

So Cato hit the railroad spike on the head. Comparatively, ride-booking apps add convenience and independence.

No wonder Texans - and Texas lawmakers - favor them.