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Conservative think tank pans Red Line

By Joe Marusak

Commuter rail to Iredell called 'fundamentally incompatible' project

CORNELIUS A representative from a national conservative think tank is panning the proposed \$452 million Red Line Regional Rail project, calling it "an expensive, risky project that is likely to produce few benefits for anyone other than the contractors who build it."

Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow at the Cato Institute told about 100 government officials and residents at Cornelius Town Hall this morning that buses can produce the same benefits as the Red Line at a far lower cost. Highway expansion is much better at reducing congestion than rail is, he said.

The project would upgrade 25 miles of Norfolk Southern rail line from a mile south of the Lowe's headquarters in Mount Mourne to the planned Charlotte Gateway Station uptown. The line could eventually extend north to Interstate 40 in Statesville.

Under a proposal unveiled in December, the state and the Charlotte Area Transit System each would pay 25 percent of the Red Line cost, or \$113 million apiece. The seven governments - Charlotte, Huntersville, Cornelius, Davidson and Mooresville, along with Mecklenburg and Iredell county governments - would pay the other half.

O'Toole said with Charlotte growing at 3 percent a year, most of the potential growth touted by Red Line proponents would happen whether the rail project happened or not.

He said cities that built such lines experienced cost overruns and never budget the millions of dollars needed to maintain the lines, which he said last 30 years before having to be rebuilt.

This morning's meeting was among several being held in North Mecklenburg to gather input on the Red Line project.

Mooresville developer Brad Howard addressed the gathering after O'Toole's talk and said the real estate brokerage and development community plans "to stay engaged to analyze and better understand the details of the finance plan."

Howard said he'd also like to hear from an expert that supports rail transit, "to provide balance to the discussion."

Howard and his father, Rick Howard, are the original developers of the planned \$1 billion Langtree at the Lake mixed-use community on Lake Norman in southern Iredell County.

When an audience member asked Brad Howard whether he'd benefit financially from the line, Howard said Langtree at the Lake is a mile from the nearest proposed Red Line stop and that all residents would benefit from any economic growth brought by the line.

He said he also hoped the Cornelius task force that invited O'Toole will also invite a rail proponent "so we may hear opinions from both sides."

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