

Cato scholar says streetcars are a fad and a folly — and he’s wrong even where he’s right

By Michael Lindenberger, June 14, 2012

There is not much to like about the livability movement afoot in the world of urban planning to Randal O’Toole, the beleaguered Cato Institute’s transportation scholar. The very term, he suggests, should be read as “living without automobiles” and he means it like a curse word.

Today, Cato released a 20-page study on the problems with street cars that raises some very valid points. He uses Portland as the exemplar of his thesis, which is fitting given its lion’s sized role in helping spread the national thirst for street cars which we’ve written about, too.

North Texas figures prominently in that debate, and for reasons at both ends of the spectrum: Fort Worth made news when it, just after winning a coveted discretionary grant from the feds, voted in city council to say no thanks — and turned President Obama transportation secretary down flat. The money would build a street car line that the council in that city had no interest in operating, it turned out.

Over in Dallas, the enthusiasm runs the other way — and it runs white hot. This city is knee-deep in expansion plans for both [the McKinney Avenue Trolley](#) and a [new street car line that will carry a few folks to Oak Cliff](#), from Union Station in Dallas across the river to the hospital.

DART is on contract to build a streetcar system for the city of Dallas, starting with a tiny line across the Trinity River. One of the models for the modern street car was in March of last year to let DART officials and members of the media kick the tires. (Rex C. Curry/Special Contributor)

O’Toole’s point is that these things don’t attract nearly the ridership that should be required to spend tax dollars on them, and even the promise of economic development near the new lines is ephemeral or gamed with public subsidies. In Dallas, the starter line will likely prove out his point initially — we’re talking maybe a couple hundred people will use the line each day.

And while they are cheap to build compared to light rail projects, they aren't cheap. The tiny Dallas starter line — I think it's about 1.1 miles off the top of my head — will cost tens of millions to plan and build, and much more to extend to Bishop Arts, as planners hope one day to do.

So why I am so nonplussed by O'Toole's report? He makes valid points about many of the hyped claims from streetcar supporters, but he is so slavishly devoted to the idea that highway and street improvements are the only way to bring life and vitality to a city that it's hard not to conclude he misses the forest for the trees. Here's his final pronouncement in the intro to his report:

“Based on 19th-century technology, the streetcar has no place in American cities today except when it functions as part of a completely self-supporting tourist line. Instead of subsidizing streetcars, cities should concentrate on basic—and modern—services such as fixing streets, coordinating traffic signals, and improving roadway safety.”

Aside from the nonsense about 19th Century technology — like paving streets and timing traffic signals is the latest thing out of Silicon Valley sweat shops? — that paragraph in two sentences sums up the limits of his thinking when it comes to planning a better city.

Nothing in that prescriptive trifecta is anything that shouldn't be done — sure, time the signals, fix the streets, and make things safer. Check, check and check. Brush your teeth before you leave for work, too.

The impetus behind street cars is a valid one, even if the projects themselves don't always live up to the hype of their promoters, and even if sometimes they ought to be shelved.

And it's that underlying impetus that O'Toole dismisses, and thus in this reader's views, wrecks his whole argument.

Cities are right to look at new ways to organize themselves, and right to encourage changes in the way land is used and the way people choose to live in relationship to the places they need to go to regularly, be it work or school or anywhere else. Those decisions are not made in some mythical free market, and never have been.

The government and a host of other players have always gamed the calculations — starting from the King's grant of lands in centuries past, and right up to today when every decision to widen a highway to Dallas' suburbs helps make possible, more easier, decisions to live further from the city core.

We don't have to agree on whether that's bad or good — or if it's either — to understand that government is playing a role when homeowners and renters are making those decisions. The livability movement — and yes it involves less dependence on the highways — is about the government making different investments to create different incentives.

You don't have to like those incentives. Maybe you like the old way — massive government investment in the suburban lifestyle — and that's why we have elections and democratic input in this country. Somebody gets to decide.

But when the aim is to point out the folly of the latest fad, in this case streetcars, one might consider just stating the point in language we'd all understand: Government should keep filling the trough of the folks feeding out of the current bonanza, ie: the highway-centered lifestyle O'Toole prefers, and not send a trickle into the feed bins of those hungry for new options and new ways of imaging life in the American city.