



Analyst: Red Line is not the way to go

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by [Eren Tataragasi](#)

CORNELIUS – The Red Line Regional Rail project won't be cost effective, won't encourage development and won't reduce traffic on Interstate 77. That's the opinion of Cato Institute Senior Fellow Randal O'Toole who gave an hour-long presentation Wednesday, Feb. 8, at Cornelius town hall.

O'Toole, a self-proclaimed rail enthusiast, has been an analyst for the nonpartisan Cato Institute since 2008. Despite his love for rail history, in his opinion, the Red Line (the 25-mile commuter train proposed from Charlotte to Mooresville) and any passenger rail system, is the wrong way to address congestion and increase economic development.

"Every study has found rail is the least cost effective way to solve these problems," O'Toole said. "... rail is obsolete and just doesn't make sense anymore. It's a great way of moving coal, containers, grain, etcetera, but it's a terrible way of moving passengers. It's just not cost efficient and not attractive to riders because it doesn't go from where they are to where they want to go."

He also argued businesses won't want to relocate to where the cost of business and living is higher, and if the Red Line would actually increase property values it would discourage business owners. He added mixed-use developments aren't successful either because there's not enough customer traffic spurred by rail lines, and not enough parking in those developments to encourage other shoppers to visit.

O'Toole also said the financing plan for the Red Line is ineffective and puts too much of the burden on taxpayers through tax increment financing and special assessment district taxes.

"The original cost projection for the Red Line in 2002 was \$280 million, the current cost projection is \$450 million, but no one knows what the real cost will be," O'Toole said. "It'll probably be higher, based on the Lynx line, costs will continue to increase."

Consultants, however, shook their heads and argued that \$450 million is the cap on the project and it will not be exceeded.

O'Toole said another reason rail doesn't work is because consultants are basing plans on the "1910 view of cities." He said in 1910, most jobs were in downtown or suburban town centers, but today, only 15 percent of all jobs in Mecklenburg County are in downtown Charlotte.

O'Toole said toll roads, high occupancy vehicle lanes and high occupancy toll lanes would do a much better job of reducing congestion on the highways, along with private bus lines, which have proved effective in other communities. He said a bus system would cost less and carry more riders, and the operation and maintenance costs would be a lot less.

"If you really want to solve congestion problems, charge a congestion toll and make it a revenue-neutral one, by reducing gas taxes, so overall people aren't paying more money and the people paying are the ones actually using the resource," O'Toole said.

O'Toole also argued because the Red Line will disrupt traffic signals, congestion will increase.

"If you build the Red Line, traffic in the corridor will be 15 percent slower than if you don't build it," O'Toole said. "Transit is not going to lead to development. It's not going to reduce congestion on the highway. If the goal is to reduce traffic congestion ... transit is not the solution. Nowhere in the country has transit reduced traffic congestion. It's kept it from getting worse like the subway system in New York City. But no new transit has led to a reduction in traffic congestion anywhere in the country."