



Indy Transit Task Force Misses the Mark

by **RANDAL O'TOOLE**

(Dec. 19) — The Central Indiana Transit Task Force has identified several problems in the Indianapolis region, including a weakening regional center, congestion and air pollution. but the Task Force's proposal to spend \$1.3 billion improving transit, nearly half of which would go to a commuter-rail line from Noblesville to downtown Indianapolis, is the wrong solution to these problems. Transit may offer mobility to people who lack access to an automobile, but for almost everyone else transit works only for those willing to make large lifestyle changes and sacrifices in their day-today lives. Transit currently carries only 0.3 percent of passenger travel in the Indianapolis area, making it irrelevant to the urban core, congestion and air pollution. Census data indicate that only about 2,000 of the 60,000 people who work in downtown Indianapolis take transit to work. Suppose the Task Force's plan manages to double transit's share of travel, something no American city has managed to do since World War II. Then it would carry just 0.6 percent of travel and about seven percent of downtown commuters to work. That is simply not enough to improve the vitality of downtown or relieve traffic congestion. Nor is transit good for the environment because buses and diesel-powered commuter trains burn fossil fuels just like automobiles. IndyGo's buses use more energy and emit more greenhouse gases, per passenger mile, than the average SUV, and extending bus service to remote suburbs will only make things worse. The Task Force's proposal to spend \$625 million on a rail line is especially questionable. Why should the region spend nearly as much money on one transit route as all the other routes put together? Rail transit is so expensive that most regions that have built new rail lines cannibalized their bus systems to pay for the trains. after Los Angeles began building its first rail lines, transit ridership declined by 17 percent until the NAACP sued to restore bus service to minority neighborhoods. Since Portland, Oregon, built light rail, the share of the region's commuters who take transit to work declined from 10 to seven percent. Similar stories can be told about Atlanta, Baltimore, buffalo, Dallas, Miami, San Francisco, St. Louis and many other cities that built rail lines. Commuter rail lines in cities comparable to Indianapolis, including Albuquerque, Dallas, Ft. Lauderdale, Nashville, Portland and Seattle, are so expensive and carry so few people it would cost less (and be better for the environment) to give every daily round-trip rider a brand-new Toyota Prius every other year for the rest of their lives. Some cities claim their rail lines spurred economic development, but this is merely more misinformation to justify bad decisions. The reality is almost all so-called "transit-oriented developments" along new rail lines required

further subsidies. Portland has given hundreds of millions of dollars in subsidies to developers along its light-rail and streetcar lines. Most cities building new rail lines are merely chasing after federal dollars. Congress' "New Starts" transit fund is designed so that cities that come up with the most-expensive transit projects get the most money, while cities that plan efficient transit systems get the least. House Republicans want to end this fund, which means Indianapolis would not be likely to get much federal funding for an expensive project like the Noblesville commuter train. The Central Indiana Transit Task Force's plan would spend a lot of tax dollars and produce few benefits. If the Task Force is truly interested in solving the region's problems, it should go back to the drawing board.