

Mass transit cost greatly underestimated

By: Chase Downham, Indiana state director of Americans for Prosperity.

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Light rail advocates recently released a taxpayer-funded “study” about the supposed benefits of the proposed Indianapolis mass transit expansion plan. According to The Indianapolis Star, taxpayers coughed up \$2.4 million for the study which details the stops for three of the five routes. If this seems ridiculous, it’s just another example of how taxpayer-funded mass transit — particularly light rail — is such a loser for taxpayers.

While the real purpose of the study is clearly to sell residents on the glitzy excitement of new buses and train cars, the study should have taken a look at a more glaring issue for taxpayers: its cost. Proponents of the project keep telling us that the entire mass transit construction and expansion costs will come to only \$1.3 billion. This would include the expansion of IndyGo, the addition of bus rapid transit lines, and the cost of a potential light rail line from Noblesville to Indianapolis. The problem is that \$1.3 billion doesn’t even cover the costs of light rail, much less the other project components.

Earlier this year, Americans for Prosperity-Indiana asked Randal O’Toole of the Cato Institute, a leading expert on the subject of mass transit, to take a look at the Indy mass transit expansion plan. His findings were stunning. Not only are the estimates extremely low for the overall cost of the proposed expansion, the \$1.3 billion price tag would likely cover only the cost of a single rail line from Noblesville to Indianapolis, nothing more.

O’Toole pointed to the example of the Denver West light rail line. Denver also planned to use an existing but abandoned line for its light rail. They estimated a construction cost of \$21 million per rail mile. In reality, the line ended up costing \$59 million per rail mile. To save money, part of the route was single-tracked, meaning trains could not run in both directions at the same time. If these same costs were projected on the route from Noblesville to Indianapolis, a 23-mile stretch, the cost would roughly come to \$1.3 billion. O’Toole pointed out that this \$59 million estimate would be typical if not low for construction projects today.

That brings us to one of the biggest questions about the Indianapolis mass transit expansion plan. We are told that the Green Line, which is the only line being proposed for possible light rail, could be used for much less costly bus rapid transit or light rail. That’s an expensive choice; yet it remains one of the many unanswered questions that have emerged as the transit plan evolves.

Hoosier taxpayers deserve to know the details that matter. As we move forward, it is our hope that the conversation surrounding transit expansion include at least some conversation about how we can do things better. Rather than force a costly plan on the backs of local taxpayers, we

should have a conversation that includes alternatives such as introducing competition to the local transit market, privatizing the bus system and determining if there is any interest in local private investment for these projects.

Americans for Prosperity-Indiana is not against mass transit. We are against taxpayer-funded boondoggles, which is where this plan increasingly seems to be heading.