

Thursday, 16 February 2012 10:53

Red Line debate: a clash of philosophies

Written by Lee Sullivan

Anti-rail points met with local counter-points during Randal O'Toole's recent visit.

It was a room full of people, nearly all of them well accustomed— and rightly so — to usually being the smartest person in the room.

Last Wednesday's community presentation concerning the Red Line Regional Rail Project was held in the meeting chamber at Cornelius Town Hall, but the ivy-draped walls of a Davidson College lecture hall just a few miles north would have been just as suitable a stage for the airing of the well-researched details, tactfully expressed opinions and debate-quality contradictions exchanged during the two-hour session.

Randal O'Toole, a smallish, docile-looking man with a string bow tie and eye-catching brass belt buckle, initially appeared miscast as the main attraction and the highly anticipated voice of doom and gloom concerning all things Red Line. But after playfully describing himself as the Cato Institute think tank's "official rail nut," O'Toole left no doubt concerning his grasp of — and staunch opposition to — all aspects of the proposed 25-mile combination commuter/freight rail project connecting Charlotte and southern Iredell County.

In a 100-minute assault on the proposal, highlighted with charts and a running commentary about the financial overruns, unfulfilled expectations and overall inglorious history of rail projects in other parts of the country, O'Toole hit all the high notes for the humming-along choir of rail opponents in the audience.

His reasons for opposing the Red Line were numerous, well-delivered and supported with his interpretation of the facts, but O'Toole was not the only intelligent, opinionated and fact-toting force at the forum.

Cornelius Mayor Jeff Tarte and Mark Briggs of Parsons-Brinckerhoff, consultant to the North Carolina Department of Transportation on the proposal, were also there, along with North Carolina Deputy Secretary of Transit Paul Morris, who is largely responsible for introducing the revamped concept for the Red Line to area officials. Also in attendance was former Charlotte Chamber of Commerce head Carroll Gray, the man who headed up the Lake Norman Transportation Commission's analysis of all things transit related for two-plus years, Bill Thunberg, the former mayor of Mooresville who replaced Gray Jan. 1 as the LNTC's executive director, and a good sampling of Huntersville, Davidson, Cornelius, Mooresville and Mecklenburg County elected officials.

After O'Toole's detailed point-by-point tirade against the project, some of those others in attendance took the opportunity to provide counterpoints. The choreography of the production did not provide back and forth, but if it had, it could have gone something like this.

Point: On financial issues related to other projects, O'Toole was readily and ably armed. He said a Minneapolis project — a design/build venture similar to (but not exactly like) the proposed Red Line — was estimated to cost \$400 to \$450 million and ended up in the \$700 million range; San Francisco's BART system had experienced massive cost overruns; and the original estimate for the Lynx Blue Line light rail in Charlotte was \$300 million and the final price was closer to \$500 million. "The real cost of this, nobody

knows," he added about the Red Line project. "We're in a recession now, and there's no guarantee it can be built for the estimated cost. I'll be very surprised if this is built, and if it is, if it is built for as little as \$452 million."

Counterpoint: Tarte provided the sound bite: "We will not exceed contract costs."

Briggs provided the punch: "This is a design/build/finance/ operate/maintain project. What makes this so attractive is that everything has to be done, in place, on budget and tested before the developer gets a penny. It is the most efficient way to transfer risk."

And Tarte added perspective: "As far as expenses, I think it's rel-evant that Mr. O'Toole said for 'as little as \$452 million.'"

Point: "If you have a train from where no one lives to where no one wants to go, it will be empty most of the time." (O'Toole)

Counterpoint: "Riders will not pay for this, that has never been a part of the plan." (Tarte)

Point: "The Red Line will actually increase congestion." (O'Toole)

Counterpoint: "As far as traf-fic congestion, this is just part of a multi-modality plan. If this was the only thing we would do it would be the stupidest thing on the planet." (Tarte)

Point: "The 'value capture' con-cept for this project is so poor, even the federal government will not be involved in it. Estimates say there will be 5,600 riders per day in 2025, but that's not new travel.

If they weren't taking the train, they'd be in cars or on the bus. There is no new value to cap-ture." (O'Toole)

C o u n t e r -point: "There are three-quar-ters of a trillion dollars on the sidelines waiting to invest." (Briggs)

Point: "Norfolk Southern can develop freight on its own. To al-leviate Norfolk Southern's liability concerns, it's going to take money. I think CATS (the Charlotte Area Transit System) is trying to bribe Norfolk Southern by promising double lines." (O'Toole)

Counterpoint: "Norfolk South-ern is positioning, that's part of negotiating. They want to under-stand general principles and will negotiate with one party, the Joint Powers Authority, when one is in place. You don't negotiate on some-thing like this with each individual party." (Tarte)

Point: "There is a basket full of federal money for rail projects and the cities that come up with the wackiest projects get the most money." (O'Toole).

Counterpoint: "We know there will be detractors. We know there will be problems. There are a lot of things to consider." (Tarte)

Point: "There are other modes of transportation that are cheaper and require less infrastructure." (O'Toole)

Counterpoint: "We need to use the facts and information from other projects the critics of the pro-posal have pointed out and go from there. That is why we have planners and experts involved. From my perspective, the questions are can it stimulate the economy and can it spur jobs." (Tarte)

The discussions, and the inevi-table subsequent debates, concern-ing the local rail project are sched-uled to continue at municipal and county levels for six more weeks.