

Red Line is a dead line, expert predicts

Written by **Lee Sullivan**
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Cato Institute's Randal O'Toole tells crowd commuter rail plan will fall short on promises.

For the record right out front, Randal O'Toole likes trains. He loves to ride them and he even owns five railroad passenger cars.

But when it comes to government-subsidized rail transit projects, O'Toole, a senior fellow with the Washington, D.C.-based Cato Institute think tank, describes himself, somewhat modestly it turns out, as a skeptic.

"Who benefits, who pays, and are they worthwhile?" O'Toole asked at the beginning of his presentation to the Cornelius Rail Task Force Wednesday morning, initiating a 100-minute outline of the many reasons he thinks any serious consideration of the Red Line Regional Rail Project from Charlotte to Mooresville should be unceremoniously derailed. His appearance in Cornelius, which attracted a room full of local government representatives as well as interested citizens, was coordinated through the efforts of Cornelius Commissioner Dave Gilroy and billed as an opportunity to hear the downside of the proposed project.

It didn't disappoint.

Accompanied by a steady stream of photographs and charts shown on the big screen in the Cornelius Town Hall meeting room, O'Toole told the audience rail projects don't ease traffic congestion, don't fuel new development, don't generate new travel, don't save energy costs and don't, in short, do all the things proponents of such projects insist they will.

It was a one-sided production, no doubt, but it was exactly what it was supposed to be. O'Toole is a leading critic of government rail projects and Gilroy, who has made no secret of his opposition to the proposed Red Line project, wanted fellow decision-makers from all jurisdictions involved as well as area residents to hear O'Toole's take on the issue.

Citing expenses, ridership and development facts from other rail projects throughout the country, including the LYNX Blue Line light rail in Charlotte, O'Toole provided a long list of way-over-budget projects that have yet to deliver the development and economic return anticipated on the investment.

"Transit doesn't trigger development. It might move it around," O'Toole said. "It doesn't create new travel, it just puts people into a more expensive form of travel."

In specific comments about the proposed Red Line project, O'Toole described the passenger car as basically a bus and said the proposed plan would "essentially use a bus on rails — a bus that costs 10 times more than a regular bus."

Later, attributing the comment to a federal administration official appalled that cities were trying to start new rail projects when they didn't even have money to repair existing streets, O'Toole said "paint is cheaper than trains. Paint a bus, call it a special bus, and you will get more riders."

He said research shows rail projects do not have any significant positive impact on traffic congestion and, after required lights and crossings are factored in, rail can even slow the overall flow of traffic.

"Transit is not the solution to traffic congestion," he said. "No new transit project has led to a decrease in traffic congestion. If you want to solve congestion, charge a toll on highways."

O'Toole said during his presentation that he would be surprised if the Red Line was ever built, and if it was, that it would cost more than \$452 million.

Following his presentation, O'Toole fielded multiple questions about specifics in his report and defended himself against allegations that his opinions were shaped by sponsors and supporters of the Cato Institute.

"I'm more concerned about if something works or doesn't work," he said, making it clear that, in his opinion, the Red Line project falls into the second category.

After a recess following O'Toole's presentation, Cornelius Mayor Jeff Tarte facilitated a question-and-answer session accompanied by Lake Norman Transportation Commission representatives and others who have been active in local presentations about the Red Line.

"We are in month one of this process," said Tarte, who made a point to thank O'Toole for his presentation. "Obviously, we will be modifying and tweaking as we go. Rail is not the

end all, be all and when we do hear from people who are experts and dead set against it we need to ask them — and here's the grammar — 'how do we make it less worse?'"

Those questions and more were scheduled to be a part of the LNTC meeting Wednesday night in Mooresville, where O'Toole was scheduled to make a second appearance.