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A Son of Portland, Ore., Tries to Puncture the Myth of 'Smart Growth'

By SAQIB RAHIM of [ClimateWire](#)

Randal O'Toole thinks riding the train damages the climate more than driving an SUV. And he thinks his numbers prove it.

It's just one of the nuggets that have made O'Toole a regular gadfly for the "smart growth" movement. When gas prices spiked last year, drivers flocked to mass transit, and urban planners took note. They knew it would lend credence to visions they had long imagined: dense urban neighborhoods, with transit veins that would make cars almost obsolete. It would be a "smart growth" model far more gentle for people -- and the climate -- than suburban sprawl.

O'Toole, meanwhile, continued to recommend deep cuts in federal transit funding. He still derides rail projects as "urban monuments" that burnish mayors' resumes without reducing traffic or emissions.

Provocative statements are the bread and butter of O'Toole's employer, the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank well-known within the Capital Beltway.

But O'Toole doesn't fit the portrait of a corporate advocate. On visits to Capitol Hill, he blends in as a middle-aged, middle-height man in a dark suit -- but his beard gives him away, its shaggy twists seemingly fitting for a forest dweller. He wears a string tie that most Americans would only recognize on Colonel Sanders. His lapel doesn't carry the standard-issue flag pin but a bronze bust of his dog, Chip. The Belgian terrier won it in a dog show.

O'Toole routinely hikes and bikes dozens of miles, and he proudly announces that he has never driven a car to work. Far from living on a luxurious Virginia manor, he left his last Oregon town when it added a third stoplight.

Now, from his home computer in Camp Sherman, Ore., population 300, O'Toole rails against smart-growth policies as money sponges that never calm traffic, fill seats on trains, or help the environment.

'Not a dominant view'

"With smart growth, they're trying to turn us back into streetcar cities. They're not going back to the pedestrian era, but they do want to turn automobile-era cities into streetcar cities, and it doesn't make sense," he said. "Why should we design our cities for the 1.6 percent of people who take transit?"

Experts agree that O'Toole's views are swimming upstream in Washington, D.C., where transportation is often a bipartisan issue. Whether a legislator prefers highways or transit, most federal funds spring from

the same source -- a tax on gasoline.

Thanks to inflation and fuel efficiency in cars, Republicans and Democrats agree, the tax is no longer enough to pay for the country's transport infrastructure. The Democrat-led Congress is considering new funding sources, and some legislators are hoping to snag up to 10 percent of allowance revenues from a proposed federal cap-and-trade bill to curb emissions.

Meanwhile, President Obama has directed his agencies to promote a shift in urban planning, changes that could cut 10 percent of the country's emissions, according to a U.S. EPA analyst ([ClimateWire](#), June 17).

But a small congressional contingent wants the opposite. Michael Replogle, a consultant for the Environmental Defense Fund and founder of a transportation advocacy organization, said the group, which includes Sens. Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-Texas) and Tom Coburn (R-Okla.), "would support eliminating all federal support for ... transport."

It was most likely a member of this troupe who had O'Toole imported from Oregon to a hearing of a Senate Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee panel last week, although the committee's Republican leadership did not return calls to confirm that. The subject of O'Toole's testimony to the Housing, Transportation and Community Development Subcommittee: how transit can play a role in reducing carbon dioxide emissions. No Republicans were present.

"No doubt, Mr. O'Toole represents a faction on Capitol Hill and in the American transport industry, but not a dominant view," Replogle said. "I'd say his perspective is a fairly radical perspective."

Early years in environmental activism

The "smart growth" contrarian grew up in Portland, Ore. -- one of the country's public transportation capitals and the darling of smart-growth enthusiasts.

As the son of a chemist and a social worker, both of whom worked for local government, O'Toole got around by bike. He dodged the charging buses that had replaced his local streetcar lines.

By college, he was an environmental activist, studying forestry and geology at Oregon State University, pushing for transit projects and harsh controls on cars on the side. Then, in 1972, the newly minted EPA began a nationwide effort to make cars cleaner and reduce driving overall. O'Toole stood behind the agency's recommendations, many of which smacked of smart growth. But he was surprised when Portland opted for the simpler path of coordinating its traffic lights better. In hindsight, he said, "Twenty years later, I can see that they were right and I was wrong."

It was the dawn of the environmental movement, and in 1975, O'Toole started a think tank. The Thoreau Institute offered environmental consulting, but it also advanced the point of view that it was possible to protect the environment without "big government."

Over the next decade or so, those political stripes sank into O'Toole. As a conservationist, he battled a Forest Service he felt was handing old-growth forests, on public lands, to "rapacious timber beasts." His campaigns worked; they chopped industry production to almost a tenth of what it once was.

Yet something about the victory tasted bittersweet to the young environmentalist. "We essentially won," O'Toole said. "But in winning, I realized that incentives are really important. You have to get the incentives right."

The problem with Los Angeles? It's not what you might think

In the following decades, O'Toole discovered more incentives to be off-center. In 1995, city planners expecting a population boom devised a plan to rezone his middle-class neighborhood's spread-out lands for housing that would quadruple its population density.

O'Toole did some research and found utility and fire districts backing the campaign. They were counting on an incentive: With a denser Oak Grove, they expected to get more federal funds for services in the area.

"This approach to smart growth was born out of sort of a grass-roots confrontation with regional planners, which is really different from a lot of people who come to this," said Sam Staley, director of urban growth at the libertarian Reason Foundation and a friend of O'Toole.

To O'Toole, federal transit funding is another incentive gone awry. He notes that Oregon was the first state to use fuel taxes to pay for roadways, a model that Congress ultimately followed. But when the federal government began shunting fuel taxes toward transit, he said, the link was broken. Suddenly, localities tilted their plans to win federal dollars. Vast sums flowed to their ambitious transit plans.

The result, he says, is a smart-growth world of fantastic distortions. He points as an example to Los Angeles, which has the worst traffic and pollution in the country: In the Los Angeles urban area, the U.S. Census Bureau [found](#) 7,000 people per square mile. Impossibly, that makes the California city more population-dense than the New York urban area, which clocks in at about 5,300.

His explanation? Los Angeles might be known for its high-flying freeways, but if one counts the highway miles on a per-head basis, it ranks low among metropolitan areas. He says East Los Angeles is mile after mile of extremely dense neighborhoods. And he describes the city's subway as a billion-dollar waste "that hardly anybody rides."

All of which allows O'Toole to make another jaw-dropping claim.

"The problem with Los Angeles is not that it's the epitome of sprawl," he says. "The problem with Los Angeles is that it's the epitome of smart growth."

Numbers that defy intuition

What about O'Toole's contention that riding transit is no better for the environment than a Chevrolet Suburban? He bases the conclusion on data that say most public transportation runs empty most of the time. That means buses and trains expend a lot of energy per passenger-mile -- moving one passenger for 1 mile -- because so many seats are unfilled.

As he argued in a 2008 [paper](#), this puts the most inefficient transit systems on par with automobiles.

"So if you get in your Suburban and drive by yourself, you're going to be emitting more than the

Washington Metro system," O'Toole said. "But if you get in your Suburban with your wife and kid, you're going to be emitting less than if [you] get on the Washington Metro system."

Over and over, O'Toole rattles off numbers that defy intuition. Each claim is a research project unto itself.

All are based on government data, a point that his boosters say makes him a tough foe for smart-growth advocates. O'Toole has no graduate degrees in a quantitative area -- he dropped his pursuit of economics and urban planning degrees after four years at the University of Oregon -- but he said "there's no doubt about the methodology" he has used.

Stacy Davis, who authored the "Transportation Energy Data Book," which O'Toole used for some of his conclusions, said otherwise. Davis is a transportation analyst for Oak Ridge National Laboratory, a research arm of the Energy Department.

For example, Davis said, comparing the emissions from trains, buses and cars is shaky. The data for each type of vehicle are collected differently, so it's hard to know if an apples-to-apples comparison is safe. And with transit, the emissions per passenger-mile swing dramatically, depending on whether one assumes that a train is full or, as O'Toole does, mostly empty.

Sustainability -- or class warfare?

Lastly, transit systems vary widely in their energy efficiency, so no claim about the lowest-carbon transport mode can always hold.

"In reality, one mode can be more efficient in Washington, D.C., while another mode is more efficient in Knoxville [Tenn.]," where Davis sees local buses zipping by without many passengers.

Smart-growth advocates see another flaw in O'Toole's argument. They say he focuses narrowly on transit's carbon footprint but never considers how transit can reshape communities.

Replogle, the Environmental Defense consultant, said vast research shows that if transit serves a dense area where people can meet many of their daily needs by biking and walking, the whole "transportation system" shrinks its carbon footprint. Some mock this as a European fantasy, but smart-growth backers point to development forming around transit in Dallas, Denver and elsewhere.

Other cities see something in the hype. According to the American Public Transportation Association, light-rail systems or extensions have been proposed in 37 cities, among them Phoenix, Atlanta and Jacksonville, Fla.

O'Toole, of course, sees another force behind the movement -- class warfare.

"I think a lot of the anti-suburban sprawl crowd is made up of middle-class people who resent the fact that working class people have adopted their lifestyles," he said. "Many of them have moved into their neighborhoods, and they don't want to see those kind of people in their neighborhoods, because they have different lifestyles. Maybe they drink more, maybe they're noisier. I don't know."

Taking the message back to the West

O'Toole descends the steps outside a Senate building, having just testified to the Banking subcommittee. He survived a gauntlet of smart-growth witnesses who tore at his methods and findings. He bit his tongue when Sen. Robert Menendez (D-N.J.) celebrated the expanding Hudson-Bergen Light Rail, across the river from Manhattan, a line O'Toole says is in fierce competition for the lowest ridership in the country.

It's a message he will soon take to Las Vegas, where a libertarian conference will meet his opinions with cheers instead of sneers. His presentation will be entitled "How Obama Is Using Transportation Funds to Turn the United States Into Europe."

His plane leaves in four hours, so he issues a polite goodbye and trots off toward Washington's Union Station, already visible down the street.

Presumably, he's got a train to catch.

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