

THE HAYRIDE

And Now, The Advocate Trots Lanny Keller Out For A Two-Fer...

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March 23, 2016

...both to continue the paper's orgy of bashing Bobby Jindal and to push another tired and rejected idea, that of the choo-choo train between Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

We covered the anti-Jindal thing on Monday when Tyler Bridges got 1,500 words over the weekend to babble about how much everybody hates him. Yesterday it was Stephanie Grace's turn; the result was unremarkable.

And today, it's the "conservative" columnist on the paper's editorial staff who joins in. This part is a doozy...

The costs of establishing a commuter train were to have been borne by the federal government. In the wake of hurricanes Katrina and Rita, it was likely the 2009 economic stimulus package could have provided \$300 million or more to upgrade tracks and buy trains for a commuter line. If still a competitive grant, it would have been as close to a slam-dunk as one can imagine, in those circumstances, with a new administration eager to show it was helping Louisiana's recovery.

Fail. The administration of Gov. Bobby Jindal, itching to declare its distance from President Barack Obama, refused to even apply. Despite the long-standing GOP support for passenger rail, the new and radical ideological focus of the Jindal administration overrode common sense.

Today, there remain real costs to establishing a commuter link, but it makes so much sense that the obstacles are likely to be overcome.

"We see a new energy around this project," Beverly Haydel, of the Baton Rouge Area Foundation, told donors and community leaders at the group's annual meeting.

Keller goes on to extoll the virtues of Gov. John Bel Edwards, who likes the choo-choo train and wants to go even further and build one in North Louisiana. There are more people in the New Orleans area by far than there are living along I-20, and yet somehow that would make a profit.

Keller leaves us with this hilarity...

Opposition to this project is a willful blindness to the change that is going on around us. The nature of work is evolving, and time spent idling behind a wreck on I-10 is wasted; the worker on a train is using her laptop and phone all along the way to the major airports or the business centers in either city.

The notion that a few million in annual subsidies is somehow transit socialism is particularly obtuse. Every form of transportation, even toll roads that are getting a new look in the Baton Rouge area, are subsidized by general taxpayers in multiple ways.

Willful blindness indeed. Here's some willful blindness for you.

Our regular readers understand this already, but for those of you who are new, a revelation – \$300 million wouldn't come even remotely close to covering the cost of the choo-choo train between Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

That proposal suggests something which will not happen; namely, that they'll have an existing line of rail between Baton Rouge and New Orleans they can use to run passenger trains on and all it needs is an upgrade for high-speed passenger trains. No such line exists.

And why?

This is something that Lanny Keller, who is supposed to have a clue about how real life works given that he's the non-liberal on the Advocate's editorial staff, really ought to understand. Follow us here – the current tracks between BR and NO are owned by railroad companies, and those companies operate trains which travel on those tracks.

The trains in question don't carry passengers. They carry freight. And freight, as it turns out, is a lot more profitable than passengers. There are considerable reasons for this, the most obvious of which being that you can charge more for freight and it isn't quite as demanding as a passenger is. But you don't have to get bogged down on that question; you can take it on faith that if the railroads have decided to run freight trains on those lines rather than passenger trains they're doing so out of a judgement based on experience.

And the freight trains running on those lines operate based on a timetable the railroads have optimized. To introduce passenger trains going back and forth from Baton Rouge to New Orleans all day long would interrupt those timetables.

Therefore, the railroads will not surrender their rail lines to passenger trains. A dedicated line would have to be built to house the choo-choo train Keller and the rest of the do-gooders want your tax dollars to pay for.

And that's going to cost more than \$300 million. You can bet your sweet bippy on that. Think billion with a "b," not million with an "m." We know this because we know what the LA-to-San Francisco rail boondoggle is costing in California; the current estimate is \$64 billion for a 587-mile line. That comes to \$109 million *per mile*.

And they're not building that line over water or swamp like you'd probably have to in Louisiana.

So no, this wouldn't be a \$300 million project. It would be more like an \$8 billion project. Or, if we'd have only have half the graft, corruption and waste in this project that Jerry Brown is having in California, perhaps it's a \$4 billion project.

And how much money does Louisiana have to spend on it?

Good question. How much of a cut do you guys want to impose on higher education and health care to pay for this train?

And once it's built, who wants to subsidize it to keep it going?

Keller probably ought to read his own paper. If he did, he'd remember that Randal O'Toole, the transportation expert at the CATO Institute who knows way more about this stuff than anybody here apparently does, used the train fantasy's advocates' own feasibility study to bomb it to smithereens in an op-ed that ran in the paper just a month ago.

Based on a feasibility study prepared for this project, trains between New Orleans and Baton Rouge will take less than 2 percent of the cars off Interstate 10 and require subsidies of at least \$44 per ticket. This subsidy is so great that taxpayers could just as easily buy a brand-new Toyota Prius every year for anyone who rode the train round trip every weekday.

The study concluded it would take 10 years and cost nearly \$450 million to get the tracks in shape to run trains at a top speed of 110-miles per hour (but a much lower average speed). It also found passenger fares would only cover about a third of operating costs, so taxpayers would have to spend an additional \$16 million a year subsidizing operations.

Studies like these always are optimistic about costs and ridership. Government-subsidized rail projects have ended up costing an average of 50 percent more than originally projected, carrying an average of 30 percent fewer passengers than projected. But, for the sake of argument, let's use the study's numbers.

The study predicts that when completed, the eight round trips per weekday and four on weekends will attract 886,400 passengers per year. That works out to 1,420 people (or 710 round trips) per weekday.

By comparison, the Louisiana Department of Transportation records an average of 50,000 vehicles per day on I-10 between Baton Rouge and New Orleans, numbers that are likely to grow significantly in the next few years. Assuming the people taking the train would have otherwise driven in cars with an average of 1.4 people per car, this means the trains will carry less than 2 percent of the traffic between the two cities.

The plan calls for fares of \$13 per trip, but these will not come close to covering costs. Rail infrastructure tends to have a 30-year lifespan, and amortizing the project's capital costs at 3 percent (a typical rate for federal transportation loans) results in a \$23 million annualized cost.

Add this to the \$16 million operating cost and you get a subsidy of \$44 per ticket. This means the annual subsidy for someone who took the train round trip every weekday between New Orleans and Baton Rouge would be nearly \$23,000 per year, or roughly the price of a Toyota Prius.

For Keller to dump on Bobby Jindal for not signing Louisiana up for this idiocy might be the final straw. The Advocate can't claim to be an objective source of news anymore.

Hell, to continuously bring up the choo choo train, not to mention continuously beating on Jindal, who is no longer a factor in Louisiana politics, isn't really even news.

Maybe we shouldn't even call The Advocate a newspaper. It seems more like an oldspaper.