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**New Study Examines the Cost of Transit in Georgia**

Submitted by **Benita M. Dodd**

Public transit is often portrayed as a low-cost, energy-efficient alternative to auto driving. Cato Institute Senior Fellow Randal O'Toole debunks that portrayal in an Issue Analysis for the Georgia Public Policy Foundation.

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"In fact, transit is much more costly than driving, and requires huge subsidies to attract any riders at all," writes O'Toole in, "**Public Transit in Georgia: High Costs for Low Fares,**" which was released today by the Foundation.

"Moreover, transit systems in the vast majority of American cities use more energy and emit more greenhouse gases than the average car," adds O'Toole, whose latest book is, "Gridlock: Why We're Stuck in Traffic and What to Do About It."

For every dollar collected in fares from transit riders, the average transit system in America requires more than \$2 from taxpayers for operating subsidies plus more than \$1 for capital improvements and maintenance, according to O'Toole's analysis.

While it's no surprise that Georgia's transit systems require large subsidies, it may surprise Georgians to know that most systems are "far less environmentally friendly than a typical sports utility vehicle," O'Toole writes.

He compared the cost of driving with the cost of transit and found that the total cost of driving in Georgia is still less than 22 cents per passenger mile, with a subsidy per passenger mile of a half-cent. By comparison, the national average cost of public transit is more than 90 cents a passenger mile, more than 70 cents of which is subsidized by non-transit users.

In Georgia, the costs are a little lower: 84 cents per passenger mile, 72 cents of which is subsidized. Georgia transit riders pay an average of 85 cents every time they board a bus, while taxpayers pay an average of nearly \$3 to support that trip.

As for energy efficiency, O'Toole says, driving is more energy efficient and cleaner than most public transit in Georgia. The most energy efficient transit systems in Georgia are vanpools, the closest thing public transit offers to actual cars.

Why is transit less energy efficient? One reason is that a crucial part of energy efficiency is filling the seats, O'Toole says. The average transit bus in Georgia fills only 22 percent of its seats, and counting standing room they operate an average of about one-sixth full. The Atlanta rail system fills an average of 39 percent of its seats, but counting its ample standing-room capacity it operates only about one-eighth full.

Those who want to save energy and reduce pollution would do better encouraging people to drive more fuel-efficient cars than encouraging cities to expand transit service, O'Toole says.

That's not to say there are no ways to make transit a better deal. For example, O'Toole cites the mantra of rail proponents – "Highways are subsidized, so we need to subsidize rail transit as well" – in calling for an end to highway subsidies. That's one way to get transit authorities to be more cost-conscious instead of justifying the diversion of billions of dollars to rail projects. Contracting out, privatizing and downsizing transit vehicles also can contribute to lower costs and more efficient public transportation, he says.

For those who truly have no access to automobiles or are unable to drive, O'Toole suggests vouchers. From taxis to airlines, a voucher enables those individuals to make the best choice for their needs – at a lower cost to taxpayers.

O'Toole's Issue Analysis should become a cautionary tale for Georgia's planners chomping at the bit for their turn at the federal trough. And it should be a road map for local governments now that Governor Sonny Perdue has signed into law the **Transportation Investment Act** of 2010, which would allow regions to come together on projects to be funded by a penny sales tax. For transportation policy to succeed, it is imperative that Georgians see prudent expenditures that relieve congestion relief and improve mobility.

The Issue Analysis, "Public Transit in Georgia: High Costs for Low Fares" can be accessed at <http://tinyurl.com/2d4xg7q>.

*Benita M. Dodd is vice president of the Georgia Public Policy Foundation, an independent think tank that proposes practical, market-oriented approaches to public policy to improve the lives of Georgians. Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of the Georgia Public Policy Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before the U.S. Congress or the Georgia Legislature.*

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