

THE AUSTIN CHRONICLE

Bedfellows Getting Strange

By Michael King

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The campaign in support of **Project Connect**, and its proposed initial rail line now entering the final decision phase, hasn't really gotten rolling yet. Nevertheless, supporters and detractors of mass transit unhappy with the plan aren't waiting – they're taking aim and blasting away.

The first salvo came from the **Coalition on Sustainable Transportation**, a conservative group of local highway advocates who have traditionally opposed all mass transit projects except those aimed only (in theory, at least) at the “transit dependent” – i.e., folks who can't afford or otherwise use automobiles. **Jim Skaggs**, former Tracor CEO and a longtime Road Warrior, helped distribute via email a June 1 *Statesman* op-ed by favorite COST ally, CATO Institute anti-transit polemicist **Randal O'Toole**. O'Toole's endless refrain is that all rail lines are too expensive and less efficient than cars and buses, and that the only reason cities build rail lines is to draw down federal money. “[T]hey really don't care about transportation,” writes O'Toole. “For the city of Austin and Capital Metro, a major reason to push light rail is to get ‘free’ federal dollars.” (Apparently for O'Toole, federal highway dollars are untainted by such mercenary motives.)

Skaggs accompanied O'Toole's op-ed with a brief letter of his own to the **Central Corridor Advisory Group**, the task force appointed by Mayor **Lee Leffingwell** to evaluate mass transit options and make recommendations to City Council and Capital Metro. Skaggs wrote, “The transportation evaluation process has been spearheaded, for several years, by Project Connect; an organization supported and funded by Cap Metro, Lone Star Rail, and the City of Austin. The entities supporting Project Connect and the people managing it have generally presented biased, unobjective evaluations, seemingly driven by strong self interest to support the pre-determined rail solution which is contrary to the greater good of the community, as described in these pieces.” (Skaggs linked to a longer version of the O'Toole screed and other anti-rail pieces on the COST web site.)

A few days later (June 5), the **Central Austin Community Development Corporation**, a community organizing nonprofit, issued a press release announcing a “powerful grassroots coalition” to oppose the Project Connect plan, arguing instead for the **Guadalupe-North Lamar corridor**. Issued by CDC Director **Scott Morris**, the release was co-signed by representatives of the **Crestview, Highland, Hyde Park**, and **Northfield** neighborhood associations, and **UT-Austin student government**, collectively self-described as “serving over 100,000 Austinites.” The release argues against Project Connect's current plan: “Our groups strongly support light rail, but Project Connect's East Riverside to Highland Locally Preferred Alternative (LPA) would result in a broken system, an ineffective transportation

investment for our city and region, and a politically non-viable ballot measure.” (Morris is also treasurer of “**Our Rail**,” a PAC organized to support only a Guadalupe-Lamar alignment and to oppose any Project Connect plan for the Highland corridor.)

The statement describes the Highland plan as “symbolic and duplicative,” and continues, “We can choose a plan that will maximize economic, environmental, and social benefits, or we can choose to prioritize narrow development interests over the transportation needs of the people who live here now.” (Our Rail also charges that the Highland corridor plan is being driven by unnamed “development” interests, although it remains unclear why “developers” would not stand to benefit equally or better from what Our Rail argues would be the more effective Guadalupe-Lamar alignment.) The CACDC group is also submitting its materials to the City Council, Capital Metro, and Lone Star Rail.

There remain several months between now and November – and pending action from City Council, et al., no urban rail bond has yet been defined or adopted. But it does seem Project Connect opponents have gotten a running start on the campaign while supporters have yet to tie their shoes. And while these two groups have nominally different agendas – COST generally opposes all mass transit, while CACDC, et al., say they only oppose this project – the groups are united in attributing bad faith to the official planners. For rail opponents COST, the offstage villain is the federal government; for self-described transit “supporters” it’s sinister “development interests” – although virtually all major transportation projects of any kind have federal participation, and all (to one degree or another) proceed in consort with economic development, if they are to succeed.