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Rare Hillsborough Democrat joins up with transit critics

September 24, 2010 at 9:16 am by [Mitch Perry](#)



The Cato Institute's
Randal O'Toole

There were over 100 people in attendance this past Wednesday night at the Alfano Center in north Tampa as a coalition of critics of the penny transit tax gathered for a night of good old fashioned light rail bashing.

Randal O'Toole from the Cato Institute and Wendell Cox, a fellow at the Heritage Foundation, were two of the featured speakers who gave power point presentations on why they believe light rail has been a boondoggle for every community that's spent money on it, and why Hillsborough County voters should reject it when it comes before them in referendum form this November.

The evening began with two local Republicans who lost in their respective bids for political office last month, Josh Burgin and Brian Blair. Burgin's candidacy was essentially based on his opposition to incumbent Mark Sharpe's support for the transit tax, but even though he was able to get a nice boost in funding from his former boss Sam Rashid, Burgin was unsuccessful in persuading local Republicans that was reason enough to throw him out of office.

Burgin told the crowd Wednesday, "I took a pretty strong position....I'm 100% opposed to the increase of taxes."

Though Brian Blair lost in the crowded House District 47 GOP race to Jamie Grant, his second electoral defeat in three years, he refuses to back away from the spotlight. He recited the familiar talking points of anti tax critics, and alleged that those business groups who are strongly backing the efforts for a light rail system in the county are doing it solely for their own self interest (and that's something new?), saying, "follow the money. It's about those who want to leave a legacy or have skin in the game."

He was followed by Randal O'Toole, who began his presentation by describing himself as "official rail nut." In an entertaining set of photographs, O'Toole tried to link land use officials in cities that have rail with commissars from the Soviet era. He also presented what he said were solutions to our transportation problems, such as traffic signal coordination, which he said would save "lots and lots of energy."

He was followed up by Wendell Cox who said succinctly that "you are headed for a train wreck" if Hillsborough voters approve the transit tax.

Both critics also used the imagery of a new car in their presentations (as did local transit critic David Caton earlier this year), saying that it would be cheaper for the county to buy a BMW for every citizen that what it will ultimately cost per rider in implementing a light rail system.

Perhaps the most interesting event of the evening for this reporter was the site of Democrat Michael Steinberg in the audience. Steinberg is running against Jamie Grant in the HD 47 race. He told CL that he is against the transit tax, though we were unable to elucidate his reasons for that (the presentation had just begun). We have to say we haven't heard too many local Democrats on the campaign trail take that point of view, so we do look forward to speaking with Steinberg further about why he is opposed to the measure (Look for this spot to be updated later with those comments).

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