



Expert: Pinellas light rail plan an expensive, low capacity mistake

By William Patrick

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TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — High costs and low passenger capacity. That's the diagnosis one transit expert has of Pinellas County's \$1.7 billion light rail project, a plan that depends on raising the local sales tax to the highest rate in Florida.

Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute in Washington, D.C., calls it a greenlight to waste money.

"This would be a disaster for transit riders, taxpayers, and auto drivers in the region," O'Toole [wrote in a Watchdog.org commentary](#).

[O'Toole is the author of a new study](#) examining more than 60 rail systems across the country and throughout Latin America. The Pinellas County plan would actually cost less than some light rail systems, but the study questions whether these public investments are worthwhile.

"Rail transit is often sold to politicians and the public on the claim that it can move more people per hour than a multilane freeway, but in fact that only applies to high-capacity rail," the study reads. "The difference between light and heavy rail is not weight but capacity: light rail is low-capacity transit while heavy rail is high-capacity transit."

Light rail trains run at ground level and share roads with motor vehicles. The trains must be short so they don't block street traffic when stopping to pick up and drop off passengers.

The Pinellas plan calls for three to five cars per train and 16 stations along the proposed 24-mile track. The total one-way travel time is an estimated 57-minutes.

"Trains running in city streets are limited in speed for safety reasons," O'Toole said. "Such slow trains mean fewer trains can run per hour."

Barbara Haselden, a Pinellas County resident and known critic of the proposed light rail, told Watchdog.org she's not surprised at the study's findings. As a grassroots organizer for No Tax for Tracks, Haselden has been sounding alarms bells for months.

“The train does too little for too much money,” Haselden said. “I’m not surprised at all. It’s not the solution we need in Pinellas County. The solution is to rework the bus system.”

At nearly \$71 million a mile, the 10-year rail project is the most ambitious feature of Greenlight Pinellas, a proposed overhaul of public transportation services on the west side of Tampa Bay. The track would connect St. Petersburg to Clearwater.

Escalating capital costs of 3 percent to 4 percent a year puts the total price tag, assuming no cost overruns, at \$2.3 billion, [according to a feasibility analysis](#) of the project.

Even so, Pinellas County is expected to grow by more than 200,000 people and add 148,000 jobs in the next 25 years, according to the Metropolitan Planning Organization.

O’Toole’s solution? Buses.

Calculations based on rail car capacities found in the National Transit Database show three-car light rail trains in most cities accommodate 9,000 people per hour. The national average for buses is 10,000 people per hour. But double-decker buses jump capacity to 17,000, and at a fraction of the cost of light rail.

“Double-decker buses on exclusive bus lanes can move more than 110,000 people per hour. Just the seated passengers would vastly outnumber both seated and standing passengers on the highest-capacity rail lines,” O’Toole said.

Greenlight Pinellas, however, comes with expanded bus services. In addition to the light rail, the transit plan proposes to increase bus services by 65 percent, and includes:

- \$147.8 million in rapid bus transit capital costs.
- \$45 million bus center.
- \$150 million bus expansion.

O’Toole blames federal programs for enticing local governments into overspending on rail projects despite inefficiencies.

[A cost analysis](#) requested by the Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority states the Pinellas light rail could receive 50 percent to 80 percent of its funding from the Federal Transit Administration’s New Starts program.

If the funding is less than 38 percent, the local share of the project’s costs would increase through taxes and additional debt.

The Cato study also points to the hidden future costs of maintaining rail lines.

“Rails cost far more to maintain than roads, and while the cost of roads is shared between autos, trucks and buses, most rail transit lines are dedicated exclusively to the few rail riders.”

In a previous interview with Watchdog.org, O'Toole said "only about 1 percent of all travel in Pinellas County is by transit."

Pinellas County voters will take to the polls in November to determine the fate of Greenlight Pinellas and its light rail centerpiece. Voters will have to approve a 1 percent sales tax increase, or 14 percent increase in the rate of sales tax.

The Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority has been under investigation for the past two months by the Florida Department of Transportation for potentially misusing hundreds of thousands of tax dollars in their effort to educate voters about Greenlight Pinellas.

By only advertising the proposed benefits concerned residents and state Sen. Jeff Brandes, R-St. Petersburg, questioned whether the PSTA was illicitly using tax money to effectively advocate in favor of the sales tax referendum.

An FDOT inspector general's report on Monday cleared the PSTA of any wrongdoing while also disclosing that the transit authority spent \$620,525.

"This is a \$100 million permanent annual sales tax increase that is unnecessary," said Haselden. "The solution isn't an expensive light rail so we say 'No Tax for Tracks.'"