



Pinellas County Should Red-Light the Greenlight Transit Plan, Expert Says

By: [William Patrick FloridaWatchdog.org](http://FloridaWatchdog.org) | Posted: January 31, 2014 3:55 AM

If Pinellas County residents are expecting economic growth in exchange for a taxpayer-funded public transit project known as the Pinellas Greenlight Plan, they may be disappointed, according to one transit expert.

“Transit agencies have this fantasy that if they spend more on transit then they can get more economic growth,” said Randal O’Toole. “There’s absolutely no reason for that to be.”

O’Toole, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, is the author of numerous books, scholarly papers and articles relating to urban growth, public land and transportation issues.

In an interview with Watchdog.org, O’Toole expressed skepticism about the Pinellas Greenlight Plan and others like it.

“Only about 1 percent of all travel in Pinellas County is by transit,” he said. “So even if you double that -- and only one urban area in the U.S. has been able to double transit ridership in the last 50 years and that’s Las Vegas; they did it without building any rail lines -- but even if you double it, it’s not going to be enough to affect the economy of the region.”

“People aren’t going to go around constructing buildings or houses or factories along the rail line because 1 percent of all their customers use the light rail or the expanded bus system,” O’Toole said.

Using data from the National Transit Database and the U.S. Census Bureau, O’Toole found that increasing transit spending actually has the opposite effect.

By comparing the country’s top 64 urban areas -- defined as areas with at least 600,000 people -- per capita transit spending and respective growth rates, the result was clear: Urban areas that

seek to provide high-cost transit services, such as trains, in order to attract people out of their cars tend to grow far slower.

The Pinellas Greenlight Plan proposes a \$100 million annual sales tax increase for expanded bus services and a 24-mile light rail track. Voters will have the final say in November through a referendum vote.

In December, the County Commission approved an ordinance establishing the ballot language:

"Summary: Shall the improvement, construction, operation, maintenance and financing of public transit benefiting Pinellas County, including an expanded bus system with bus rapid transit, increased frequency and extended hours, local passenger rail and regional connections be funded by levying a 1 percent sales surtax from January 1, 2016, until repealed, with the proceeds deposited in a dedicated trust fund?"

The ordinance also states the transit plan would increase economic competitiveness, promote economic and community redevelopment as well as create jobs. No specific details are included.

"Anytime government spends a lot of money on something, some people will make a lot of money off it; everybody else will pay a little bit," O'Toole said. "The people who stand to make a lot of money have a strong incentive to invest in these types of projects and make arguments for them."

The real problem, he said, is that spending enormous amounts of money -- in this case \$1.7 to \$2.5 billion -- for relatively limited transportation benefits for the entire community will lead to a demand to spend even more money to expand the system into new areas. Spreading that kind of money around is a political winner, O'Toole said.

"Transit doesn't go very fast, it doesn't go exactly where people need to go and it's expensive," he said. "Cars go everywhere and they go a lot faster than public transit. Studies have shown that having a car is more important to having a job than having a high school diploma."

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