



## Ruth: Greenlight Pinellas criticism bought on the cheap

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This certainly ought to clear up any confusion anyone had over the Greenlight Pinellas transit referendum: Randal O'Toole has spoken his two bits.

Actually it was \$500 worth of bits to get O'Toole to conclude Greenlight Pinellas would be a pox on humanity. The November referendum would create a one-cent sales tax to dramatically expand bus service and begin a 24-mile light rail line throughout the county. If it passes, the Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority will eliminate the property tax it collects.

Imagine if opponents had managed to cough up even more money for O'Toole's preordained opinion — they might have gotten their rent-an-expert to predict the proposed light rail system was a mind control plot by the United Nations to turn everyone in the county into a newt.

Greenlight Pinellas has been a contentious issue throughout the county. But signing up an avowed opponent of light rail to cook up a 31-page review of the measure whose final analysis was more predictable than Secretariat running a mile and a half against a swaybacked Old Dobbin hardly contributes much to the social discourse over the initiative's efficacy.

O'Toole is a senior fellow at the Libertarian Cato Institute, which begs a question: Does the Cato Institute have junior fellows, or apprentice fellows, or novice fellows-in-waiting? But we digress.

Doug Guetzloe, who heads up the Orlando-based Ax the Tax, paid for O'Toole's review, which characterized the referendum as a "callous disregard for taxpayers and the need to make the most effective use of available resources." Is that so?

If some tyrant had imposed light rail upon an enslaved citizenry, one might consider Greenlight Pinellas the most callous confiscation of tax dollars since King George III got all greedy over a tea tax.

But a referendum, which asks the public if they want to be taxed to build the project doesn't quite rise to the level of a "callous disregard" of the body politic. It is called an election. They're all the rage.

Did anyone expect O'Toole to arrive at any eureka moment other than Greenlight Pinellas will be a boondoggle? This would have been like the women's temperance movement coming out in favor of dry martinis, or the Koch brothers endorsing Hillary Clinton for the presidency.

Voters being asked to tax themselves for an enhanced transportation system are more than entitled to know the unvarnished details of what Greenlight Pinellas will cost to build and manage.

And if the measure passes, it will mark a sea of change in how people get from A to B, it will spur economic development and mark a first step in linking Tampa Bay. Or it could be a disaster.

If Greenlight Pinellas fails, it would leave the region as the last major metropolitan area in the country without a coherent transit system and ensure more status quo gridlock. Or there's a chance another transit plan could succeed in the future.

Either way, the public is entitled to a fair hearing on Greenlight. You can't put too high a price on intellectual honesty in this debate. But \$501 would seem to be a good opening bid.