



## Cato Institute fellow critical of Greenlight Pinellas light rail

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Saturday, September 6, 2014

If light rail opponents had a rock star, Randal O'Toole would probably be him.

The senior fellow at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, has written extensively on the subject, arguing that there has never been a successful light rail project.

O'Toole will be in St. Petersburg this week to campaign against the Greenlight Pinellas transit referendum, which seeks a one-cent sales tax increase to expand bus service and build a 24-mile light rail line between St. Petersburg and Clearwater. It goes before voters on Nov. 4.

O'Toole recently released a 31-page review of the referendum at the behest of Doug Guetzloe, leader of an Orlando-based political action committee called Ax the Tax that campaigns against rail projects and other tax referenda.

Heavy on data and sprinkled with snark, O'Toole's paper called the plan an unnecessarily expensive solution that shows "callous disregard for taxpayers and the need to make the most effective use of available resources." Light rail, he wrote, is an inflexible technology that will be obsolete by the time it would start running here in 2024.

He advocated instead for the Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority to create several rapid bus routes.

Greenlight proponents say O'Toole makes dozens of claims that are unsupported, inaccurate or misleading.

"A consistent theme of this paper is an absolute lack of understanding of the needs of Pinellas County," said Kyle Parks, spokesman for the Yes on Greenlight campaign. "Mr. O'Toole is a professional contrarian who is paid to oppose transit around the country and we have very different aspirations for our county and our communities' potential."

O'Toole was paid \$500 to write the report.

The light rail line system in the Greenlight plan would cost about \$1.6 billion to build. With busing added, that cost comes to \$2.2 billion. The entire system will cost \$130 million a year to operate.

O'Toole, who did not respond to interview requests, wrote that building a light rail line to anchor Pinellas County's bus system is like building a wood-frame house with a hallway made of solid gold.

"The hallway would end up costing far more than the rest of the home combined, without providing any additional functionality except to serve the ego of the homeowner," he wrote.

Increased subsidies for transit rarely lead to proportional increases in ridership, he wrote, citing studies that indicate rail projects cost about 40 percent more than anticipated because it's impossible to accurately predicate future costs and demand.

In 2012, he said the average PSTA bus occupancy was eight riders, below the national average of nearly 12, demonstrating that "PSTA has a lot of room for growth without any increase in service." He reasoned that people sharing driverless cars will render transit "superfluous" as people "simply call for a self driving car to come to their door."

He argued that double-decker buses can move more people per hour compared to light rail trains. The buses, he said, are as fast as light rail, cost much less, and their routes can be changed.

His prescription: PSTA should pay a private contractor to run its system and use the savings and federal grant money to start eight rapid transit bus routes for \$82 million. Or, the agency could start fewer routes and extend hours of existing routes that would feed into rapid routes.

"This way, instead of spending more money on poorer quality transportation, as Greenlight Pinellas proposes, taxpayers will get better transit at no greater cost," he wrote.

O'Toole's ridership analysis is flawed, PSTA officials said.

Rather than use National Transit Database figures, as O'Toole did, PSTA officials pointed to a 2012 consultant report by Transportation Management and Design commissioned to look at every route in the system. That research found about 26 riders, on average, board a PSTA bus every hour.

Agency officials also logged record ridership of 14.4 million in 2013.

Adding eight rapid bus routes wouldn't come close to meeting the county's needs, and neither will driverless cars, Parks said.

The Greenlight plan would expand bus service by 65 percent by adding weekend and evening hours and creating six rapid bus routes. The rail line would connect the county's two largest cities and the Gateway area, a trio of employment centers totaling some 110,000 workers.

A robust transit system will attract young people and businesses who demand it and help the growing ranks of elderly who need it, Parks said.

"Common sense dictates that if you improve the system, more people will ride," he said. "We've heard that from all over the community."

Instead of fixating on the total cost of the plan, proponents say, taxpayers should consider the effect on their own wallets. If Greenlight passes, PSTA will eliminate its current property tax levy, which will result in a net savings for many Pinellas property owners. The sales tax will only apply to the first \$5,000 of a purchase, and necessities such as food and medicine will be exempt.

A return on the investment will come from redevelopment along the 16-stop rail line, Parks said.

"It's not about bumping up the population," he said. "It's about making better use of the land we have and creating walkable communities. That's not going to happen by itself in Pinellas County."