

THE TAMPA TRIBUNE

Outsiders not best source of transit advice

By Joe Brown

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Back in 2001, I was awarded a fellowship by the Western Knight Center for Specialized Journalism and attended a week-long seminar on urban issues at the University of California at Berkeley. I, along with a few other journalists, joked that it was the only way we could attend such a prestigious institution.

One of the sessions was on metropolitan transportation, which covered everything from bicycle paths to light rail to superhighways. The speakers did a good job of presenting both the limits and benefits of alternatives to the automobile, but one guy stood out in his criticism of public transportation. His name was Randall O'Toole, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute. Last week he brought his unorthodox ideas here to speak against the upcoming Greenlight Pinellas referendum.

Back in Berkeley, a journalist from Portland, Oregon, praised that city's light-rail system as a model for the rest of the nation, with its 84 stations and 52 miles of track connecting the city, airport and metro region. Others who had visited, including some of the speakers, agreed.

Then came O'Toole, who was, ironically, a native of Portland. He ranted about how his hometown never would have built a light-rail system without "federal pork." He also cited ridership statistics about how in 1980, before the city began building light rail, 9.8 percent of the region's commuters took public transit to work, but in 2001 it had dropped to 8 percent, with the rail system accounting for only 1 percent of the area's travel.

He also called the widespread belief that light rail is good for the environment a myth, saying that many lines consume about as much energy and emit as much greenhouse gases per passenger mile as your average SUV.

"Light rail is a giant hoax that makes rail contractors rich and taxpayers poor," said O'Toole, and he has been saying the same thing ever since.

So it's no surprise that he would be against the light-rail line that would be built if Greenlight Pinellas passes. In a 31-page critique of the referendum, O'Toole called it unnecessary, expensive and likely to be obsolete by the time it's completed next decade. As he has proposed

in other cities, he recommends that the Pinellas Suncoast Transit Authority invest in express buses — which the PSTA already has announced it would.

You can't argue with a lot of what O'Toole has to say, but my main criticism of him is his one-size-fits-all approach to every metropolitan area. In the San Francisco Bay area, for example, the importance of the rail system is evident when transit workers go on strike, which happens frequently. In other cities, however, a work stoppage would barely affect most commuters.

One theme that came out of that Berkeley seminar was that many cities in the West and South were playing catch-up when it came to public transportation. In the industrialized Northeast and Midwest towns that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, streetcars, buses and rail lines were a necessity to get workers to their jobs. Businesses demanded it, and elected officials responded.

Newer cities have a less-centralized layout and were built with the automobile in mind. Also, in many homes today, every licensed driver has his or her own car, and most prefer to use it whenever possible, which makes projects like a light-rail system a harder sell.

The light-rail plan for Greenlight Pinellas, which would travel from downtown St. Petersburg to downtown Clearwater, is not exactly what I would call mass transit since it would leave out many areas of the county. Hopefully, it would have the option to expand if it's built.

Voters in Pinellas have about seven weeks to decide if Greenlight Pinellas is worth a one-cent sales tax increase. This is definitely a pocketbook issue, as the old saying goes, and it needs to be studied carefully. And since the tax will be paid by local residents, they are the main people who should be voicing the pros and cons since they know the area best. Experts from think tanks can make some good points, but it's important to remember that they won't be living here after the ballots are cast.