



## **Get on the bus - not light rail, one expert urges**

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**Report from the Cato Institute argues that buses are a better, cheaper transit option than the light rail that many cities are pursuing. Transit group disagrees, says buses part of overall transit mix.**

As cities around the country build expensive light-rail transit systems meant to move people efficiently, one of the nation's best-known transit gadflies is suggesting that, in many cases, there's a much cheaper, more efficient alternative: Buses.

That's right, buses. Specifically double-decker buses.

In an analysis published Tuesday, Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, argues that "in nearly every case buses can move people just as comfortably (if not more so), just as fast (if not faster), and at a far lower cost. Buses share (roads) with cars and trucks, reducing their cost, while the use of high-occupancy vehicle or high-occupancy toll lanes would allow buses to avoid congestion during even the busiest times of day.

"Part of the problem is that cities are putting light rail in places where there isn't a lot of demand for transit in the first place," O'Toole said in an interview. "In those places, ordinary buses will do just fine. In places with high transit demand, double-decker buses would be a better solution."

Rail transit in the USA tends to take one of two forms: With heavy rail, the lines are completely separated from vehicle traffic, either by elevating them above the street or running them in underground tunnels; with light rail, some or all of the line is built at street level, sharing space with vehicles and pedestrians.

Traditionally, heavy rail has been much more expensive to build. Elevated rail typically costs two to four times as much per mile as building at ground level, O'Toole says; underground rail is two to four times more expensive than that.

Because of that, cities turning to rail transit usually opt for light rail.

And, O'Toole argues in the analysis published by the Cato Institute, a vital point is overlooked. "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 (heavy) rail."

Light rail carries fewer passengers because trains that run on city streets can be no longer than a city block or they would block traffic every time they stopped. Also, trains running at street level have to run at slower speeds for safety reasons, meaning fewer trains per hour.

"There's a huge amount of profit to be made in building rail lines," O'Toole said. "There's a lot of pressure from the contractors, engineers, design firms and railcar manufacturers to build rail because there's so much profit to be made."

O'Toole's analysis is "fatally flawed," said Art Guzzetti, vice president for policy at the American Public Transportation Association who also spent nearly 20 years at transit agencies in New Jersey and Pennsylvania.

"Asking whether buses can replace rail is the wrong question," he said. "Buses are important, but it's really the system that's the main thing, and buses are part of the system, along with rail and along with roads. To look at it otherwise is to look at the trees and not the forest."

He said O'Toole's analysis is "a very flawed report on technical grounds." One example: He said O'Toole's methodology in determining capacity of buses vs. light-rail doesn't include "dwell time," which is time riders spend paying fares, going up or down bus steps and so on. "I would call that a fatal flaw," Guzzetti said.

"To lay people, Randal's argument sounds compelling," he said. "But he's made this argument before. He's just packaging it differently. Local governments have considered his arguments against rail in the past, and they have seen right through them. They have decided on rail anyway."