

# THE ADVOCATE

## **Proposed rail linking cities is a boon, not a boondoggle**

Johnny Adriani

February 11, 2016

When a proposed public project attracts cynical attention from the Cato Institute, chances are that project is gaining traction. For a passenger rail in Louisiana, this is a good thing.

The recent guest column written by Randal O'Toole, published in The Advocate on Jan. 31, is highly critical of a proposed intercity passenger rail project between Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

So condemnatory was this epistle that it labels the project as a "boondoggle" and accuses politicians of the lustful passion to squander millions of the taxpayers' dollars.

O'Toole goes to great lengths to discredit the rail project listing a litany of statistics and figures while blasting government-subsidized rail projects for costing an average of 50 percent more than originally projected.

Yet the art of argument is always worthy of acute study. For some reason rail projects are invariably tagged with the caveat that they are "government-subsidized." Neglected is the fact that implementing, maintaining and expanding any public project requires taxpayer funding and thereby is "government-subsidized."

O'Toole seems to be disillusioned with the belief that all other transportation construction projects somehow magically swell out of the ground without burdening the state coffers. Unfortunately, they do not.

The recent expansion of the Huey P. Long Bridge, which was a sheer engineering marvel, cost Louisiana \$1.2 billion. This was an improvement of roughly 5 miles of roadway. The construction of the John J. Audubon Bridge between St. Francisville and New Roads, which consists of a 2.5 mile bridge and 12 miles of connecting roadway, cost the state in the ballpark of \$409 million. A conservative estimate indicates that \$807 million will go toward expanding the Louis Armstrong International Airport. The Interstate 10/12 corridor maintenance and perpetual expansions? That would take an office building of CPAs to calculate. Lest we forget the cost of those pesky levees, the dredging of the Mississippi River for commerce or the billions spent on FAA air-traffic control.

The rail project between Baton Rouge and New Orleans currently is estimated around \$450 million. This is not a few miles of concrete that serves a population specific geography; it is an 85-mile corridor of alternative transportation between the state's two largest population centers.

As a proponent of the Baton Rouge-New Orleans rail project, there is no argument against the merits of limited government or a free market society. Yet to continually imply that private industry is not subsidized by government construction of roadways and airport terminals is an absolute fallacy. Remove these government-subsidized projects from the equation, and the trucking, airline and busing corporations would find themselves about as profitable as Amtrak.

A free market society is dependent upon infrastructure. It is the infrastructure that spurs economic growth. Across the United States the most prosperous cities employ mass transit systems to affordably, conveniently and safely convey commuters between their homes and their work. The Baton Rouge-New Orleans rail project is an investment in Louisiana's economy and future