

# THE ADVOCATE

## **Rail's pros not seen from D.C.**

John Spain

February 17, 2016

This letter is in response to The Advocate guest column by Randal O'Toole, a representative of the Cato Institute, who objected to spending for commuter rail service between Baton Rouge and New Orleans.

O'Toole's arguments are invalid for the most basic reason. His economic analysis relies on an outdated study that estimates capital investments at \$450 million — nearly double the real cost for upgrades, which, according to an analysis for metro planning agencies across our region, is calculated at \$250 million.

But it's more than bad math. From his office in Washington, D.C., O'Toole can't see the advantages on the ground for the citizens who actually live in the region. A commuter train, operating at regular intervals between Louisiana's two biggest metropolitan areas, is needed to continue the growth of the economic super region, which already has 2.6 million people (54 percent of the state population) and 1.2 million workers (59 percent of all workers).

A commuter train would provide efficient and reliable transportation for employees living in our cities who commute each day to work in one of the fastest-growing industrial corridors in the nation. And it could be accomplished by just taking advantage of existing rails that are already in place.

He misses other benefits, too — things that are obvious to anyone who regularly drives between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. For example, commuters could choose the reliability of the rail over the uncertainties of traveling on the interstate, plagued with the problems of escalating rush-hour traffic and deadly accidents. These are problems that can't be solved by just adding a lane to Interstate 10. Not only would it cost hundreds of millions more than a train line, but, as research has proven, the road would soon grow to be just as clogged with traffic as before.

With a stop at the New Orleans airport, the train would enable easy access to international flights not offered by the modern Baton Rouge airport. Rail commuters could use their time to read or do work aboard the train, increasing productivity and peace of mind. The rail line would also be vital during hurricanes, quickly and predictably evacuating New Orleans well ahead of the storms.

Better than anyone writing remotely from Washington, we know that commuter rail is a smart investment in Louisiana, one that starts building a multimodal network and gives residents a choice for getting between two cities that depend so much on each other. The rail would bring Baton Rouge and New Orleans just that much closer to each other, leaving both better off.