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Better transit need not cost more

Randal O'Toole

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Contrary to John Robert Smith's opinion piece in the May 8 Spokesman-Review, the Spokane Transit Authority's proposed tax increase isn't about attracting millennials to the Inland Empire. Instead, it's about using your tax dollars to match federal grants that will be spent on projects that won't necessarily improve transit ridership or transportation in Spokane.

For example, STA wants to buy giant, 120-passenger buses for \$1.2 million each, more than three times the cost of an ordinary bus, to operate on its proposed Central City bus route. STA planners predict that, if they run these buses 316,000 miles per year, they will attract people to ride them 1,077,000 passenger miles per year.

Do the math: that means each bus will carry an average of 3.4 people, and probably no more than a few dozen during the busiest times of the day. Why should taxpayers shell out \$1.2 million for humongous buses that will mostly run empty?

Few Spokane residents use transit on a regular basis. The Census Bureau says that just 3 percent of Spokane-area commuters, or fewer than 5,100 people, regularly took transit to work in 2014.

Census data also show that just 2.6 percent of Spokane-area workers lived in households without cars in 2014. How did they get to work? Almost 40 percent of that 2.6 percent drove alone, perhaps in cars provided by their employers, while 8 percent carpooled. A full 25 percent walked to work while less than 24 percent took transit, showing that transit isn't even important to most people who don't have cars.

Despite transit's lack of relevance to most people, STA wants taxpayers to give it more money so it can do projects promoted by the federal government. For example, the agency wants to:

Construct another expensive "transit center" that won't move a single passenger;

Buy super-expensive battery-powered buses whose environmental benefits are questionable because it takes almost 4,000 BTUs of energy to generate and transmit electricity to charge a battery that provides just 1,000 BTUs of power;

Increase congestion by encouraging the construction of high-density housing projects along transit corridors.

Smith cited Eugene, Oregon's bus-rapid transit line as an example of how Spokane can improve bus service. What he doesn't say is that Eugene took street lanes previously opened to cars and

dedicated them to buses that use only 1 or 2 percent of their capacity. This increased transit speeds by only 4 percent.

The real reason ridership increased was that Eugene offered the service for free for the first year. Ridership dropped after they began charging fares and Eugene's overall transit ridership has declined in each of the last three years, according to the National Transit Database.

The idea that transit attracts millennials originated in Portland, which opened its first light-rail line at about the same time Oregon became the second state to legalize microbrew pubs. Four more light-rail lines later, the share of Portland-area commuters taking transit to work has declined from 10 to 8 percent, while the Portland area has more than 90 microbrew pubs. Which do you think truly attracts millennials to the Rose City?

Many of STA's proposals will do very little to increase transit ridership; instead, they are things that the Federal Transit Administration will fund if there are local matching funds. STA wants to raise your taxes to be eligible for those federal grants.

Rather than giant, battery-powered buses or immobile transit centers, experience has shown that the one sure way to increase transit ridership is to offer more transit service. STA can do this without raising your taxes by simply contracting out bus service to private operators.

Denver contracts out half its bus service. The unionized private contractors pay property, fuel and other taxes that the transit agency avoids. Yet in 2014 taxpayers paid contractors just \$6 for every mile they drove a bus compared with \$11.50 per mile for buses operated by the transit agency.

Contracting out buses could allow STA to greatly increase service at no extra cost to taxpayers. Spokane voters should be skeptical of any plan that costs more money until STA has saved money by contracting out its bus service.

Randal O'Toole is a senior fellow with the Cato Institute and author of "Gridlock: Why We're Stuck in Traffic and What to Do About It."