



Bus-centric planning good for short run in Pinellas

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I wonder what Randall O'Toole would say about the decision by Pinellas County transit officials to use a \$500,000 grant from the Florida Department of Transportation to build a rapid transit bus line between downtown St. Petersburg and the county's beaches?

O'Toole, a senior fellow at the libertarian Cato Institute, has made a career speaking out against light rail systems. Last year he was brought here to speak against the upcoming Greenlight Pinellas referendum, which failed. In June of this year, he wrote an op-ed that appeared in the Tribune's editorial section headlined, "Rapid-bus systems a smarter investment than light rail in U.S." According to him, "Light rail is not only vastly more expensive than buses, it is slower, less comfortable, less convenient and has lower capacities than a well-designed rapid-bus system."

I first met O'Toole in 2001 during a seminar on urban issues at the University of California at Berkeley. 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, O'Toole, stood out in his criticism of public transportation.

He ranted about how his hometown of Portland, Oregon, never would have built a light-rail system without "federal pork." He also cited ridership statistics about how the rail system accounted for only 1 percent of the area's travel.

"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.

In his Tribune column, O'Toole noted: "Being expensive to build, light rail can only reach parts of a region and thus most people have to drive to a park-and-ride station or transfer from a bus to train and back, thus lengthening the time of their trip. By comparison, for less money, rapid buses, which often rely on dedicated bus lanes to bypass traffic, can reach every corner of an urban area."

So what is a rapid bus line? According to the National Bus Rapid Transit Institute, it's "an innovative, high capacity, lower cost public transit solution that significantly can improve urban mobility. This permanent, integrated system uses buses or specialized vehicles on

roadways or dedicated lanes to quickly and efficiently transport passengers to their destinations, while offering the flexibility to meet transit demand.”

BRT systems can easily be customized to community needs and incorporate state-of-the-art, low-cost technologies that result in more passengers and less congestion.”

The key word is flexibility, meaning it can be customized to community needs and be changed if ridership is low. The proposed Pinellas route will loop from downtown St. Pete to the county’s beaches, straddling Central Avenue on streets to the north and south. Eventually, according to the Tribune’s Steven Girardi, “Rapid transit routes are planned to connect to the Gateway area and across to Westshore in Tampa, and from Clearwater Beach to Tampa International Airport.”

So you can add feasibility to the proposal as well. A multicounty plan floated by state transportation officials to convert CSX freight lines for rapid transit use is worth exploring but many years away. A FDOT study to qualify it for federal funds is at least two years away. After that it will take years figure out the cost, and whether it will be workable. Buses present no such problems. While the operating costs for them can be high, the capital investment is not as great.

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. That’s because 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.

We’ve local transportation referendums in the Tampa Bay area, but our growing 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. That makes public transportation projects a harder sell, even something as practical as additional bus routes.

The rapid bus proposal is supported by tourism officials because it gives visitors transportation options, and St. Petersburg Mayor Rick Kriseman called it “another step toward reducing reliance on cars and making the city more walkable.”

We’ll see. There’s no telling how many tourists or drivers will take advantage of it if and when it gets going, but they’ll at least have an option. In the end, that’s all public transportation can provide, no matter how feasible it might be.