



High-speed rail expert tells fair crowd that Zip Rail shouldn't go

By Sandy Hadler
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ZUMBROTA — Randal O'Toole laid out his case against high speed rail on Friday evening as he spoke to a large crowd gathered in a tent at the Goodhue County fairgrounds.

State Rep. Steve Drazkowski introduced O'Toole, a Cato Institute senior fellow, who works on urban growth, public land and transportation issues. Over the years he has been called upon to help a number of cities deter high speed rail projects proposed for their areas. Some area residents have started to rally against the proposed Zip Rail between Rochester and the Twin Cities.

O'Toole made it clear that he loves trains and dislikes driving, but he said he dislikes subsidies even more, which is why he opposes high-speed rail projects that require huge subsidies to survive.

In the 1930s, the rail lines between Chicago and the Twin Cities sported a number of high-speed trains, including the Burlington Zephyr, which went 120 mph, he said. Then the government stepped in and said trains couldn't travel at that speed, because they were unsafe. So high-speed rail in the United States died in 1951.

Thirteen years later, Japan created a successful 150 mph bullet train system. The rail project paid back all its capital costs in 10 years, O'Toole said. The Acela line served an extremely high population corridor of 40 million people. That has increased to 60 million.

O'Toole credits that high population density for the initial success of Japan's bullet trains. In 1964, only 11 percent of the Japanese traveled by car and less than 1 percent by air, so the bullet trains attracted riders away from slow-moving trains, not from cars or airplanes. The same thing happened when Europe began building high-speed trains in the 1980s, he said.

Since that time, a reversal in usage has occurred. In 2000, those same Japanese trains were carrying about 25 percent of the country's travelers, with cars transporting more

than two-thirds of the remaining population. The same has happened in Europe. O'Toole said it is because worldwide most people prefer to travel in their own vehicles.

The Tokyo-Osaka line and the line in France between Paris and Lyon are the only high-speed rail lines that are financially successful; dozens of others that are not. O'Toole noted that in Taiwan a private investor built a high-speed rail line and it failed, so the government is subsidizing it. In Spain, a high-speed rail train was shut down because it cost \$20,000 a day and carried only nine passengers a day.

O'Toole said he thinks the populations in Rochester and the Twin Cities are far too low to financially support the proposed Zip Rail, which he said will be extremely expensive to build and maintain. Estimated cost is \$66 billion per mile because there must be an over or underpass at every intersection.

He favors air travel over high speed rail, pointing out that rail is much more expensive than air because infrastructure for rail requires considerably more maintenance, especially for high-speed rail, where everything must be kept in perfect working order to ensure safety. Airplanes require no infrastructure when they are in the air, and airport infrastructure is relatively cheap, with almost all the cost being paid from ticket fees.

Current airfare between the Cities and Rochester is around \$200, but O'Toole said Delta could easily charge \$25 to \$50 for a flight between Minneapolis and Rochester and still make money. He based that assumption on flight costs between other cities with similar mileage.

He noted that everyone who wants high-speed rail is scrambling to get environmental impact statements done, in hopes that Congress will grant money toward those lines. But in reality, he said, it could take many years and most likely won't occur until there is a democratically controlled House and Senate.

"We are talking about the past, not the future," O'Toole said of high-speed rail. "Within 20 years, half of you will have self-driving cars, and within 30 years we will all be riding in them."

He said these cars will offer the ability to go from point A to B without having to take a taxi or drive to a train station and will allow the passengers the freedom to play games, watch TV and do other activities with their children, all in the privacy of their own car. These cars will be energy efficient and "green."

The Metropolitan Council's plan for 2040 doesn't even include self-driving cars in its 40-year travel plan, he said, questioned why.