

## Opponents paint grim picture of Nashville transit plan at forum watched by both sides

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Opponents of Mayor Megan Barry's transit plan brought in conservative thinkers leading the fight nationally against light rail Saturday to make the case that a \$5.4 billion transit undertaking proposed for Nashville would be a disaster.

Equipped with slideshows, graphs and tales of similar projects gone wrong in other cities, speakers — each from right-wing organizations skeptical of transit — took turns hammering a plan they said wouldn't yield the results to justify the steep cost.

The occasion: a panel discussion called "Off Track: What's Wrong with Nashville's Transit Plan" hosted by the Beacon Center of Tennessee, a free-market think tank that is fighting the transit referendum that Barry wants to hold May 1.

The mayor is seeking voter approval for increases to four taxes to pay for a mix of light rail, bus improvements, rapid bus and new neighborhood transit centers.

The three-hour event, held at Belmont University, was emceed by conservative radio talk show host Ralph Bristol, who kicked things off declaring, "Let the trial begin." It drew a packed room of 150 spectators and provided an opening for transit critics to hit Barry's project from a multitude of angles.

"I think of light rail as the diamond encrusted Rolex watch of transit," said Randal O'Toole, senior fellow of the Cato Institute, a libertarian think-tank. "It's something that doesn't do as much as a real watch can do. It costs a lot more. And it serves solely to serve the ego of the people who are buying it.

"And that doesn't necessarily mean the taxpayers, it means the city officials who are hornswoggling the taxpayers into supporting it."

### **Transit referendum backers track event**

Other guest speakers included representatives from the Heritage Foundation, the libertarian Reasons Foundation and the Competitive Enterprise Institute, as well as the Nashville-based Beacon Center, a 501 (c)4 organization that has pushed back at Barry's proposal since it was unveiled in October.

Watching from the front row was automobile salesman and Republican activist Lee Beaman, who is treasurer of a new political action committee called NoTax4Tracks that is leading the local opposition to Barry's plan.

Observing from the back of the room were some of the project's top proponents and architects: the mayor's Chief Operating Officer Rich Riebeling, the Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce's Chief Policy Officer Marc Hill and Gary Garfield, former CEO of Bridgestone Americas who co-chairs the chamber's Moving Forward transit Initiative. Project consultants were also in the room.

Riebeling declined to respond to the arguments of opponents when asked by a reporter, other than to say he was there to watch and listen as a citizen.

### **'Costs too much and does too little,' transit critic says**

O'Toole, known nationally as a harsh transit critic, said light rail would be more appropriately named as "lie rail." He called it "low-capacity transit" that can move only half the number of people as traditional buses when enough buses are deployed on a corridor. He also said light rail has fatality rates that are three times higher than buses.

He said "every light rail project ever built has had a huge cost overrun." He also pointed to cities hailed as transit successes such as Portland, Ore., arguing that transit ridership as a share has declined there since light rail was built in the 1980s. He said it's a pattern across the country.

"So, here we have something that is very expensive, can't move as many people, and is slow and unsafe — and that's the kind of thing that these people want you to build," he said.

He said adding more lanes of traffic on highways, like Tampa, Fla. has done, is more cost-effective to address congestion. He also suggested a mantra for opponents of Nashville's transit proposal to adopt: "It costs too much and it does too little."

### **Transit booster questions data, points to cities with ridership gains**

Garfield, head of Moving Forward and supporter of Barry's plan, downplayed the criticism, saying that the Beacon Center tapped people who are flatly opposed to any type of mass transit system.

"What they haven't done is looked at the whole plan that Mayor Barry has put forward, which includes bus, rapid bus transit and light rail," he said. "It's a comprehensive plan with many different alternatives attempting to solve and address our growing transit issues. That's what it does. It's a very good plan."

Garfield questioned the data of O'Toole and he pointed to cities such as St. Louis, Houston and Dallas and Salt Lake City, where he said light rail ridership has increased, in some cases, exceeding projections.

"I suspect that will be the case here."

But Michael Sargent, policy analyst at the Heritage Foundation painted a bleak picture of Nashville's chances to land federal funding from the Trump administration that is critical to help pay for transit.

Barry's administration has identified more than \$2 billion in federal sources needed to help pay for the project.

Sargent said the Federal Transit Administration under Trump is delivering capital investment grants to only existing transit projects, not new projects. He also said he expects the upcoming budget pushed by House Republicans to cut grants used for transit. The Heritage Foundation, a critic of public transit, has pushed for sweeping cuts to the FTA.

"Overall, what we're seeing from this administration is it's very clear that business as usual is coming to an end," he said. "There's not going to be any more free money dealt out as loosely as we saw from the last administration."

### **Final council vote to add measure to ballot set for Feb. 6**

Ron Shultis, policy coordinator for the Beacon Center, discussed how the overall cost of Barry's plan would be nearly \$9 billion when factoring in future operations, maintenance, inflation and other considerations. He noted that the plan's 1-cent sales tax increase by 2023 would tie Nashville with Chicago as the nation's highest.

"When people are struggling, coming out of this recession, to put food on the table, to put kids through college, these are real costs that they need to be thinking about over the next couple of years," he said.

A separate panel at the event focused on "A Better Plan for Nashville," which explored the future of autonomous vehicles, among other ideas.

Hill, of the chamber, which has advocated for transit in Nashville, afterward tweeted his takeaway from the event's discussion on technology: "Don't do anything."

"At some point — not sure how or when — the FUTURE will solve our traffic problems. Maybe that's how other communities approach their challenges, but not Nashville," Hill tweeted.

My takeaway at Beacon Center event from speakers on technology:

Don't do anything.

At some point--not sure how or when--the FUTURE will solve our traffic problems.

Maybe that's how other communities approach their challenges, but not Nashville.

Also in attendance Saturday was At-large Councilman John Cooper, who has criticized the mayor's proposed referendum language, arguing it should include the nearly \$9 billion figure, not \$5.4 billion.

An amendment from Cooper to change the cost figure proposed for the ballot to the more expensive amount was defeated on Tuesday.

The council is set to take up Barry's referendum proposal on a third and final vote Feb. 6. Their action would add the measure to the ballot, but not appropriate any funding or endorse any component of the plan.