



Increasing taxes for mass transit would hurt Central Indiana

Randal O'Toole

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The Carmel Chamber of Commerce says that Indianapolis needs a regional transit system — which inevitably means higher taxes — so that the city can compete with communities such as Minneapolis and Salt Lake City.

In fact, since 1990 the Indianapolis urban area has grown more than twice as fast as the Minneapolis or Salt Lake urban areas, and faster than any other major urban area in the Midwest, so Indianapolis seems to be competing just fine without those higher taxes.

The Chamber would like you to believe that spending more tax dollars on transit means better transportation. But that's far from true.

It is important to understand that transit can have two quite different goals: first, moving people who, for one reason or another, can't drive; and second, getting people who can drive out of their cars.

Indianapolis transit now mainly provides service for the former, those who can't drive. But the need for that is small.

The Census Bureau says that just 7 percent of Indianapolis-area households lack cars, and just 17,000 workers live in households that don't have cars (nearly half of them drive to work alone anyway, presumably in borrowed cars).

Nearly all of the region's car-less households are in Indianapolis itself and won't benefit from regional transit. Advocates of regional transit, then, are mainly interested in promoting the second goal: getting people, and particularly suburbanites, out of their cars.

Ever since Ralph Nader's 1965 book, "Unsafe at Any Speed," Americans have been barraged with claims from anti-auto groups that cars are evil, gas-guzzling, polluting monsters. There may

have been some truth to that in 1965, but since then auto fatality rates and air pollution have declined by more than 80 percent, and cars today are 40 percent more energy efficient.

Nationally, cars and transit are about tied for energy consumption per passenger mile. IndyGo actually uses more energy and releases more greenhouse gases per passenger mile than the largest sport utility vehicles.

And transit, especially transit aimed at getting people out of their cars, costs a lot more than driving. Americans spend about 25 cents a passenger mile on driving, including all subsidies to highways. Transit typically costs four times that much, and those costs only rise when cities start running empty transit vehicles to suburbs where people have three cars in every driveway.

Worse, the costs of regional transit are so high that most cities with regional transit systems have had to cut bus services to those who lack cars and need transit the most. Atlanta, Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area are just some of the regions where transit riders have suffered in order to build a regional transit system.

This doesn't mean IndyGo can't be improved. Contracting out bus routes to private operators can save up to 50 percent of the costs, allowing IndyGo to provide more service without higher taxes. Suburban cities that want to send buses into Downtown Indianapolis should be allowed to do so.

Increasing taxes to create a regional transit system, however, will provide no significant transportation benefits while actually hurting Indianapolis' competitiveness.