

Rails Plan On Wrong Track

Researcher: Obama's high-speed rail idea goes nowhere fast

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WHEELING - According to economist Randal O'Toole, the Obama administration is on the wrong track with its \$53 billion plan to establish high-speed rail networks across the United States.

Proponents of the effort, he said, fail to recognize that decades of government subsidies have done nothing to decrease the number of cars on the nation's highways, as driving has increased at a rate 15 times higher than mass transit ridership since 1970. O'Toole, a senior fellow with the Cato Institute and published author, spoke Monday at WesBanco Arena as the guest of West Liberty University's Center for Economic Philosophy.

He said the administration's high-speed rail plan - already rejected by Ohio Gov. John Kasich and his counterpart Scott Walker in Wisconsin - aims at "remaking America into what they think Europe looks like," and envisions a society full of environmentally conscious urbanites.

"President Obama thinks suburbs are boring," said O'Toole. "But most people in Europe live in suburbs and travel by automobile."

O'Toole said Americans, on average, travel about 4,000 miles annually on the U.S. interstate highway system. High-speed rail, he added, best serves people who travel "downtown to downtown" - but only 8 percent of the population works in, and only 1 percent lives in, areas considered "downtown."

It costs about 35 cents per passenger mile to drive a car, said O'Toole, while public, mass transit costs about \$1 per passenger mile, almost all of it government-subsidized.

"If we build Obama's high-speed rail network, the average American will ride it about 100 miles per year," he predicted. "There's no economic value to it."

O'Toole offered his hometown of Portland, Ore., as an example, where he said use of public transit actually has declined since its Metropolitan Area Express light-rail system debuted in 1986. Economic development along the rail lines hasn't occurred as hoped, primarily because parking is inadequate and not enough people live along the lines to support business.

But, he said, the rail system has boosted a different kind of commerce.

Police "call it the 'crack line.' And that doesn't refer to the speed of the train," O'Toole quipped.

O'Toole said many of the nation's transportation woes could be improved short-term by privatizing public transit and encouraging competition, and better synchronizing traffic signals. He said studies have shown about 75 percent of traffic signals are poorly coordinated, leading to gridlock in high-traffic areas.

In the future, he believes "driverless cars" will make for a safer, more efficient transportation system without the need for tens of billions in taxpayer funding.