



Rail travel is too outdated to invest in

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Entrepreneurs and engineers are at work developing new modes and methods of mobility — from the rise of ride-sharing services to the promise of autonomous vehicles. Yet to hear many of those who plan our cities and the way we travel around and between them, innovation in the transportation sector might as well have stopped roughly a century ago.

Listen in on any discussion about transportation infrastructure and planning, and you'll soon hear a train whistle. Passenger rail still captivates the minds of many Americans, even though its prevalence and relative efficiency peaked before the vast majority of us were born. (Freight rail, which continues to thrive, is a different matter.)

“The history of transportation in our country is one type of transportation replacing another,” says Randal O’Toole, a scholar with the Cato Institute who recently visited Atlanta to discuss his new book, “Romance of the Rails.”

“You can find museums showing electric streetcars and steam locomotives,” O’Toole said, “but we don’t have multibillion-dollar federal programs preserving steam” as a transportation technology.

We do, however, have cities such as Atlanta planning to spend billions to re-create the networks of electric streetcars — a technology that debuted in Richmond, Va., in 1888 — they ripped out several decades ago to make way for rubber-tire buses.

The golden age of passenger rail, O’Toole says, ran from about 1895 to 1920.

It has been on a steady decline since then, except for a brief spike during World War II due to rationing and troop movements. Neither is a condition we want to relive, although one or the other might be necessary to justify the enormous sums proposed for high-speed rail lines linking Atlanta to Athens, Savannah, Columbus or Chattanooga.

O’Toole is a certified rail enthusiast himself, becoming smitten with passenger trains during a childhood cross-country trip and working off and on to rehab old engines. He simply doesn’t think they’ve been economical for several decades now.

That's not the same thing as saying public transportation, or transit for short, can't work. He notes that while New York City's famous subway has the capacity to move about 45,000 people per hour, a bus rapid transit line in Bogota, Colombia, manages up to 50,000.

In 1970, residents of Seattle voted down a proposed rail system and the \$1 billion in federal funds earmarked for it.

That money instead went to Atlanta to build MARTA's rail system. O'Toole points out that the share of Seattle commuters who use transit rose from 6.6 percent in 1970 to 11.7 percent in 2017 despite the lack of heavy rail; in Atlanta, which has had heavy rail since 1979, transit's share of commuters plummeted from 10.4 percent to 3.8 percent during those years.

Part of the reason for the dichotomy, he explains, is that rail projects tend to crowd out investments in bus services that actually carry more people. Los Angeles has poured money in recent years into light rail ("light" and "heavy" refer to capacity, not weights or costs). Yet that city has seen just one new rail rider for every five who quit riding buses due to curtailed routes or frequencies to pay for the new rail lines, O'Toole says.

Making matters worse from the perspective of social justice or equity, which are often cited as reasons for such investments, rail projects tend to be built in higher-income areas of cities and bus routes cut from lower-income areas, O'Toole says.

Even when rail does extend into lower-income neighborhoods, a frequent result is new development followed by gentrification, which pushes out the working class to make way for wealthier residents. What else would we expect, given that new development and higher land values — which are bound to spur higher rents and home prices — are exactly what rail proponents promise?

Traveling by rail may well still be a romantic notion, but it increasingly is an outdated one.