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Transit expert slams Nashville's light-rail plan in Wall Street Journal column

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Another public policy and transportation expert is calling out Nashville Mayor Megan Barry's \$5.2 billion mass-transit overhaul, saying plans for light rail are "simply a bad investment." Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow with the Koch brothers-backed libertarian think tank the Cato Institute, has publicly criticized Barry's transit proposal, along with other transit plans from across the country, calling the light-rail heavy plans expensive to subsidize and not aligned with a pending shift to autonomous vehicles.

In an editorial called "It's the Last Stop on the Light-Rail Gravy Train," which appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, O'Toole writes:

When it comes to mass transit, politicians never learn. Last month, Nashville Mayor Megan Berry announced a \$5.2 billion proposal that involves building 26 miles of light rail and digging an expensive tunnel under the city's downtown. Voters will be asked in May to approve a half-cent sales tax increase plus additions to hotel, car rental and business excise taxes to pay for the project.

These proposals are questionable at best and reckless at worst, given that transit ridership — including bus and what little rail these regions have—is down in all three jurisdictions. This is a nationwide trend: Data released this week by the Federal Transit Administration shows that ridership is falling in nearly every major urban area (with Seattle as a notable exception). Sean Braisted, the mayor's spokesman, said in an emailed response, "We're not going to bet Nashville's future on the same failed transportation policies that are bringing the region to a halt. We need to take action today and start to build more transportation options for all Nashville residents — and for the million more people who will live in the Nashville area by 2040." The usefulness of mass transit, as exhibited during the city's Amp debate, is often a contentious topic, with even transportation experts going head-to-head on its value to a city. Those conflicting opinions magnify just how complicated solving a city's transportation issues can be, since there is no one-size-fits-all approach to mass-transit.

The mayor's office has long argued that building mass transit is an investment in Nashville's future and that by building fixed infrastructure the city will be able to control where denser development is built.

In his editorial, O'Toole argues light rail is too costly to implement, from building a system to maintaining it. O'Toole cites federal data which shows the "nationwide transit maintenance backlog is approaching \$100 billion, causing exactly the problems you'd expect: derailments of New York City subways, slowdowns of Chicago's elevated train, smoke in Washington metro tunnels, and other operational and safety issues."

In his editorial, O'Toole suggests Nashville and other cities "ought to use buses to move people faster, more safely and for far less money." He also said cities should focus on the impact of autonomous vehicles, which he argues will be fully deployed before cities, such as Nashville, have operational light-rail lines.

O'Toole expands on his views in a recently published Cato Institute report, called "The Coming Transit Apocalypse." Unlike his editorial, he does not explicitly mention Nashville's proposal in the report.

Robin Alberts-Marigza, the campaign manager for the Nashville's pro-transit push, said in an email: "Randal O'Toole advocates against all urban planning policies, promotes urban sprawl over density, and is steadfast in opposition to all public transportation. He's not a credible source on this subject. In the 20 years O'Toole has been saying transit ridership is dead, it has actually grown by 35.4 percent. Light rail ridership alone is up 19 percent from 2007-2016, and now carries 498 million passengers annually. Laying the groundwork for a better transportation future 10 years from now is what's known as investing."

Alberts-Marigza sourced her data from the Federal Transit Administration. In September, an American City Business Journals analysis of FTA data found the use of public transportation has been on the decline for the better part of a decade. In fact, overall U.S. passenger counts were lower in 2016 than they were in 2008, and public transit systems in some 42 states and the District of Columbia collectively failed to grow ridership from levels posted in 2015. At the time, Keith Millhouse, a transportation expert based in Southern California, said the nation's transit slump can be pegged to the sector's symbiotic relationship with gas prices, although other factors also are at play. A growing economy has put money in pockets, which empowers more consumers to buy cars. And then there is the factor of time, not to mention the rapid rise in popularity of competitively priced ride-sharing services such as Uber and Lyft, he said.

In October, Aaron Renn, a senior fellow with conservative think tank Manhattan Institute for Policy Research and publisher of Urbanophile, wrote that the mayor's plan "makes no sense," saying Nashville does not have the density needed for light rail to succeed and mass transit will not solve the city's traffic problem.

Barry's plan features a variety of tax increases to build 26 miles of light rail, a 1.8-mile transit tunnel underneath downtown Nashville and four rapid-bus routes, in addition to boosting the service and frequency of the city's existing bus system.

Expect the debate to continue as we get closer to the May 2018 public referendum, when voters will finally weigh in.