

Nashville Mayor Barry takes on 'transit myths' in push for \$5.2 billion plan

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November 20, 2017

Nashville Mayor Megan Barry took on critics of her \$5.2 billion transit plan in a speech Monday, dismissing some of their arguments as "transit myths" and calling on Nashvillians to rise above the noise to address the city's rising traffic congestion.

"I think it's important that we first start with the myths — the myths about transit," Barry said to a room of business leaders at a Nashville Rotary Club of Nashville luncheon Monday.

Armed with numbers, Barry sought to discredit three arguments pushed by skeptics: transit ridership has been declining for decades nationally, Nashville lacks the density for light rail and the rise autonomous vehicles is the answer for Nashville's traffic.

She said each claim is false.

Her remarks — her most pointed yet on her controversial transit plan — came as her proposal has attracted more scrutiny since she first unveiled it on Oct. 17.

Barry is seeking a May 1 public referendum vote on raising four taxes, including the sales tax, to fund a plan that would include light rail on major corridors.

"I think we're not the kind of city that reads a couple of cynical blog posts, throws up our hands and surrenders, forgetting about our collective community vision," Barry said, adding that investing in transit came after "years and years of community conversations."

Ridership

Combating ridership claims, Barry said people in the United States took 10.2 billion transit trips in 2016 compared to 7.5 billion in 1996, a 35 percent increase. She called it the "highest levels since the highway boom of the 1950s."

She said light rail ridership is up 20 percent since 2007 and pointed to Charlotte, N.C., where she said its 10-year-old light rail line has prompted new development.

"What do you think they're doing now? Do you think they're stopping?" Barry asked. "No, they're extending their light rail another 9.3 miles. They're doubling down."

She then cited other light rail expansions in Seattle, Denver and Minneapolis.

"These are the cities that we compete with when people want to move here and bring their business here," she said. "So, I think it's pretty disingenuous for anyone to start dancing on transit's grave just yet."

In contrast, Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow with the conservative Cato Institute, has cited new Federal Transit Administration data that he said shows ridership falling in nearly every urban area.

He slammed Nashville's light rail project and other cities in a [Wall Street Journal op-ed column](#) called, "It's the last stop on the light-rail gravy train."

Density

Aaron M. Renn, a senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, has also criticized Barry's plan, writing in a recent [blog](#) that Nashville lacks the gigantic downtown employment centers of Chicago and New York to justify transit. He called Nashville "a very sprawling city with highly dispersed origins and destinations of traffic."

Barry on Monday said Nashville was "built around the car," which created the city's sprawl and congestion — which she said is "exactly the problem we're trying to solve."

Though some like Renn have questioned whether Nashville has enough density to feed rail lines, Barry said Nashville has walkable neighborhoods along corridors targeted for light rail and areas ready for transit-oriented development.

For neighborhoods that aren't so dense, she said action is needed today to get them ready. "We're just not going to sit around and wait for neighborhoods to become dense before we build transit," Barry said. "Transit infrastructure has to play a major role in how our city is growing and changing. We have to take decisive steps today."

"I know a few folks really like this idea that somehow an invisible hand is going to fix our transportation network, and that somehow sprawl is going to sort its way out," she said. "Well, we already tried that and we already know how that story ends, or precisely how it comes to a grinding halt."

Autonomous cars

Barry called her "No. 1 myth" the idea that autonomous vehicles will solve all of Nashville's traffic problems when they come online.

Several car manufacturers and other companies have been moving toward the technology, which would allow riders to commute in vehicles without driving them.

"First of all, the key word in driverless cars is still cars," Barry said. "They're still cars, people. And the fact that a warm body isn't sitting in a driver seat doesn't take that car off the road."
"Smart phones and emerging technology don't change the fact that 40 people in 40 cars takes up more space than 40 people on a bus or 400 people who are sitting on a train."

She added that Nashville's growth — an expected 1 million new people by 2040 — would make autonomous vehicles even more impractical to be the lone answer for address traffic in Nashville.

She called driverless cars "part of our transportation mix, but not the whole recipe," later adding: "We can't sit around and wait for autonomous vehicles to take care of us."
Barry said many transit critics are simply "in denial."

"We actually have to be real about the issues that we're facing. And it's fundamental, and I think a weak concept, that underlying all of these myths is the idea that Nashville can't do anything. We just can't do anything about it. We can't change the collision course of congestion that we're on, and so therefore we shouldn't do anything. We're powerless.

"That doesn't sound like the Nashville that I know."