

San Antonio Express-News

Cato scholar slams street car as obsolete ‘fantasy’

By: Terri Hall – November 28th, 2012

When 98% of Americans drive a car as their preferred mode of travel, street car advocates have a problem. Randal O’Toole, Senior Fellow of the Cato Institute, gave a series of talks in San Antonio today on the downtown street car plan being touted by Bexar County Judge Nelson Wolff. O’Toole pokes holes in proponents arguments in favor of the street car — especially the big promise of economic development. But all are based on fallacies, according to his voluminous data. Indeed, he said it’d be cheaper to give everyone a free Toyota Prius every other year, than to keep running a street car system. Which do you think the public would rather have? I’d take the Prius.

Considering the San Antonio street car proposal also plans to heist \$92 million in Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT) road funds for construction, opposition comes from nearly every corner of the spectrum. Opponents see the plan as grossly misplaced priorities when the northside sits in gridlock while it’s told there’s no money to fix roads without drivers having to pay tolls. When politicians canabalize road funds, it’s a self-fulfilling prophecy and taxpayers don’t buy it. Replacing faster, less expensive travel (auto), with slower, more expensive travel (street car) isn’t going to get people to jump out of their cars and onto a street car. The two aren’t even in the same league, neither are street cars and buses.

Street car vs. bus

In 1900, street cars traveled 8 MPH while autos top speed was about 15 MPH. By contrast, cars today routinely drive 75 MPH or more and street cars still travel at roughly the same speed, 8 MPH. Perhaps the most poignant example is capacity. Street cars move approximately 2,000 people per hour while buses can move over 6,000 people per hour. Double decker buses can carry double that without taking up anymore street capacity.

Because people prefer to drive their own cars and since highways far more utilized than rail lines, a study conducted by the University of California estimates energy costs are 150 percent of operating costs for rail compared to 60 percent of operating costs for

highway transportation. Even under the best case scenario, street cars do not provide greater mobility or energy efficiency.

Street cars also use twice as much energy to move one passenger mile as the average car. According to the Transportation Energy Data Book, the average car consumed 3,450 British Thermal Units (BTUs) per passenger mile in 2010, while the average street car consumed 7,000 (some up to 18,000 BTUs). O'Toole notes the Dallas light rail system emits 53 percent more greenhouse gases than per passenger mile than the average car.

Street cars aren't exactly safe, either. Because of its fixed-guideway system, street cars cannot move out of the way for pedestrians or vehicles like a bus or car can, they not only experience higher accident rates, they increase fatalities. The gaps created by the rail lines embedded in the streets also create a hazard for cyclists. In Seattle, cyclists are suing city officials over the accidents caused as a result of the gaps from street car rail lines.

In fact, San Antonio was the first city to remove its street cars back in the 1930s largely because they weren't safe or flexible as other alternatives, and because even then, they were becoming an obsolete mode of transportation — nothing has changed. Street cars do not have the flexibility to go to as many locations as a bus nor can they adapt to new work-travel patterns like buses and cars.

Buses can literally take people to hundreds if not thousands more locations than either light rail or street cars. They can go anywhere the street network goes. So why would San Antonio want to bring back an outmoded transportation system? O'Toole likens it to going back to using whale oil for night-time reading lights or using telegraphs to deliver messages. Do you think today's text message users wanna go backwards? No way. Neither do today's mover and shakers who wanna get where they're going, cheaper and faster than ever.

Bus service cannibalized to pay for street cars

In nearly every city that has street cars, the bus service took a hit. It costs three to four times more to operate a street car for one mile than a bus. Due to the high cost of building and maintaining street cars and the need to subsidize operating costs at far greater rates than buses, street cars suck money from bus service and maintenance, often resulting in higher fares and less frequent service. The one mode of transit that is most efficient and carries far more passengers is the mode that suffers the most from street cars — buses. The only two cities that have greater street car ridership than buses is where passengers ride for FREE.

Though the street car feasibility study claims street cars will reduce the dependency on autos, there is no evidence that auto users switch to street cars in any significant numbers. In fact, street cars have shown they actually reduce bus ridership since bus service gets cut to subsidize street cars. Transit ridership is more sensitive to frequency and speed than anything else. That's why bus rapid transit has boosted transit ridership

since it allows non-stop, faster service. Since street cars travel slower and, due to safety concerns, cannot run closer than 3 minutes apart, and make frequent and fixed stops, they have no ability to attract riders away from either cars or buses.

Still using Portland as the example, fewer people today take transit than when it was first built in 1986, and that's after they built out five lines during that time. The same is true in Dallas-Ft. Worth. Fewer people take light rail today with the system completed, than did when just the first line started.

Even the economic development argument falls flat when you look at other cities that have street cars. Take Portland, Oregon, for example. The city doled out hundreds of millions in taxpayer subsidies to developers to promote development along the rail line. But the neighborhood that didn't receive subsidies didn't see any economic development. O'Toole concludes city officials have been misled if they think building a street car line alone will magically bring economic development.

The subsidies are generally financed through property tax schemes using Tax Increment Finance Zones (TIRZ), which means property tax appraisal increases get diverted from other tax-dependent city services and cause other taxes to go up to make up for it. This, in turn, actually causes a decline in economic development as the tax burden gets higher as businesses contract rather than expand.

So matter how you slice it, O'Toole makes a convincing case that street cars "are slower, less flexible, less capable of moving large numbers of people, and far more expensive than buses." So why try to fix what's not broken? If anything, beef-up bus rapid transit instead of pursue an overly expensive, obsolete street car system subsidized by road taxes that are badly needed for actual, meaningful congestion relief elsewhere.