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Getting the Message

by [Ryan Avent](#) on [July 7, 2009](#)

Two things were clear at this morning's [hearing](#) of the Senate Banking Committee concerning green investments in public transportation. First, transportation experts and leading legislators are very much in agreement on how transportation spending should change. And second, Randal O'Toole's days as anything other than an anachronism are numbered.





Institute fellow Randal O'Toole testified in the Senate today. (Photo: [Cato](#))

The committee heard from five witnesses, one of which was Cato Institute fellow O'Toole. Also invited were Michael Replogle of the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy, Rutgers University urban planning professor Clinton Andrews, West Sacramento mayor Christopher Cabaldon, and Ernest Tollerson of the New York City MTA.

O'Toole aside, the witnesses largely agreed in their recommendations: New transit investments are absolutely necessary for economic and environmental reasons, but most of the benefits from such investments will be missed without tight integration between transportation investment and land use planning.

It was a message almost perfectly tailored to rebut O'Toole before he ever spoke.

As is his habit, O'Toole began by noting that 40 years' worth of transit investments have not produced significant reductions in driving or greenhouse gas emissions. A good talking point, perhaps -- but as previous testimony had made clear, this was largely due to 40 years' worth of disregard for the importance of land use rules.

O'Toole continued by criticizing smart growth in his home state of Oregon, declaring that efforts to change land use patterns were failures and [falsely alleging](#) that transit ridership in Portland has declined since 2000. He cited his own analyses, which attempt to demonstrate that transit is actually dirtier than personal automobile use. And he railed against the evil of transit subsidies, a market-distorting abomination in his view.

The performance earned dismal reviews. One by one, the other witnesses pointed out that failure to adequately examine land use effects rendered O'Toole's analyses worthless.

Mode choice isn't just about direct energy use, they explained; it's about how increased driving or transit use affects development patterns and broader economic activity. Moreover, increased transit use improves the efficiency of driving by reducing congestion.

Mayor Cabaldon pointed out that a 1 percent increase in transit ridership in his city corresponded to a 10 percent decline in congestion, saving millions of dollars in lost time and wasted fuel.

Neither were the witnesses the only ones to hit back at the Cato fellow. Sen. Bob Menendez (D-NJ) icily noted that the last transportation bill included some \$200 billion for highways. "That's a subsidy," he said.

Replogle piled on, noting that the failure to toll crowded roads appropriately or charge for "free" parking constituted yet another massive subsidy to drivers, encouraging auto-oriented land use patterns.

O'Toole fired back, arguing that those touting the benefits of transit investment overwhelmingly cited New York City. In his view, it appeared, transit is vital to New York but irrelevant to all other metropolitan areas in the country.

This seemed to irk Sen. Mark Warner (D-VA), whose Northern Virginia constituency is part of a Washington metro area in which over 1.2 million trips are taken on transit every weekday. He countered O'Toole's negative assessment of transit's success rate in shifting land use patterns, citing Arlington County. There, an effort to build densely around Metro's Orange Line has led to population and jobs growth and massive private investment, all without an appreciable increase in congestion.

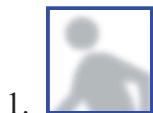
Ultimately, O'Toole was left complaining that attempts to build private transit systems were illegal -- *illegal* -- in most cities in America. He was seemingly oblivious to the irony: that sprawl, which O'Toole considers a perfect expression of consumer demand, has flourished thanks to the fact that for decades it has been illegal to build dense, walkable neighborhoods in most of America's big cities.

O'Toole was without friends in a room of leaders that finally seemed to grasp how planning had gone wrong in the last half century. At this moment -- with vehicle miles traveled falling, with central city population growth rates increasing as suburban growth rates fall, and with central city housing prices showing resilience as exurban neighborhoods continue to experience rapid decline -- Cato's myth of sprawl as the American dream seems more hollow than ever.

Happily, legislators -- at least those who attended today's hearing -- increasingly seem disposed to acknowledge reality.

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And even his last argument was blunted, from the small piece I've reviewed so far, by Sen. Warner pointing out the existence of vanpooling across the country and slug lines in DC in particular. While he didn't quite make the point of private market or public-private partnerships supporting those efforts, it certainly was implied with his question regarding incentives for mode use.

July 7, 2009 at 4:02 pm [Link # 1](#)

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