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Opinion

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The middle deck of 101 is jammed this morning

By: Adrienne J. Tissier
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Barbara F. Hollingsworth, the Washington Examiner's local opinion editor, recently declared all public transit as a waste of time and money. She cited information presented by Cato Institute senior fellow Randall O'Toole during a July 7 hearing before the U.S. Senate Banking Subcommittee on Housing, Transportation and Community Development.

O'Toole said that buses and passenger trains use vast amounts of energy and produce equally large amounts of greenhouse gases, while operating in a seemingly constant state of financial difficulty. Hollingsworth quoted O'Toole as adding that since 90 percent of all urban travel involves the automobile, "small improvements in autos can be far more significant than large investments in transit."

"If you're really serious about lowering carbon emissions," Hollingsworth offered, "supporting mass transit doesn't make much sense."

What Hollingsworth failed to mention was that the Cato Institute's 2007 annual report listed corporate sponsors as including the American Petroleum Institute, General Motors, Honda North America, Mazda North America, Toyota's Center for Trade Policy Studies and Volkswagen of America.

Meanwhile, at that same Senate subcommittee hearing, Ernest Tollerson, director of policy and media relations for New York state's Metropolitan Transportation Authority, countered that MTA "helps avoid more than 8.24 metric tons of greenhouse gases" for every metric ton of carbon MTA emits, and in 2008, MTA had a net carbon reduction of nearly 20 million metric tons.

Granted, Tollerson works for a transit agency; his testimony is not surprising.

The arguments on all sides are endless as to whether or not transit's various environmental impacts are worth the multiple tens of billions spent nationally each year.

However, setting aside the carbon footprints, the fact remains that not everyone drives, nor can everyone afford the costs associated with owning a car. Actually, in 2007, the U.S. Census Bureau found that 5.5

percent of San Mateo County households, and 9.3 percent of all Bay Area households, do not own a car. Governments large and small have a critical responsibility to provide affordable, accessible and dependable public transportation to and from schools, jobs and services.

If the internal combustion engine no longer existed and 100 percent of all vehicles ran on compressed air, there would still be congestion. Remove all considerations of energy conservation, emissions and air quality, and there still remains the physical number of vehicles on the road.

For example, Samtrans' four busiest routes (in order) — 390, 391, 292, 122 — in May 2009 collectively logged a total average weekday ridership of more than 18,900 passengers. If Samtrans disappeared and all of those passengers organized four-person carpools, that would mean an extra 4,700 cars a day on U.S. Highway 101, Highway 280 and El Camino Real.

Add the average weekday passenger counts from the four busiest services of MUNI, AC Transit in the East Bay, VTA in the South Bay, Caltrain and BART, and imagine the congestion.

Is transit worth the yearly billions in public funds?


In 2004, BART commissioned UC Berkeley to project a major earthquake cutting the Transbay Tube, causing a long-term disruption of BART service. Modeling by Cal's Institute of Transportation Studies found that without the tube, morning westbound congestion on the Bay Bridge would stretch 26 miles, and afternoon eastbound Bay Bridge backup would exceed 31 miles! That is approximately the road distance between San Francisco's AT&T Park and the Four Seasons Hotel in East Palo Alto.

How many lanes could we add to 280? How many decks could we stack on 101?

Adrienne J. Tissier is a member of the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors and the 2009-2011 vice-chair of the Metropolitan Transportation Commission.

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