

Protecting the regular bus

A major transit project requires ‘key champions and partnerships’ in order to be successful

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Over three decades, Portland, Ore., built three different kinds of rail, and the percentage of local commutes accomplished on transit went from 9.9 to 7.1.

Yes, according to transit critic Randal O’Toole of the Cato Institute, Portland’s transit upgrade actually left transit with a smaller share of local commute traffic than it previously had.

Investing in fancy new transit systems, as Mr. O’Toole pointed out in a 2013 Cato policy paper, is not always a good idea. First of all, they can be expensive to build and maintain — especially systems that run on rails. Second, they can interfere with car traffic. And third, they can leave transit agencies without enough resources to provide adequate conventional bus service to those who depend on it.

So while it’s good to imagine what new modes of transit might look like in Toledo, it is important to remember that such imaginings are valuable only if they are practical and can be sustained above and beyond the basic transit system. We may or may not want to make new transit investments. But if we make them, we must make sure we do not sacrifice the only transportation many of the Toledo Area Regional Transit Authority’s current users have.

Indeed, if we are willing to spend more on transit, we should look to improve conventional bus service. One idea to consider in doing that would be to de-emphasize TARTA’s downtown hub. Madison, Wis., and Dayton use multiple hubs, and the idea might be especially well suited to Toledo’s sprawl.

One of the simplest things that might attract new riders to TARTA is providing more information at bus stops and through smartphone apps. The easier it is to figure out when a bus is coming and how to get where you’re going by bus, the easier it is to know whether the bus can meet your needs. TARTA has said it’s working to make it easier to navigate the system on your smartphone. The signs are still a big problem, but one that can be solved.

“Conventional” bus service could also be improved by upgrading the bus fleet. At least for some runs, smaller, more fuel-efficient buses could be used.

To make sure that any new plans serve the whole community, and especially those who have no other transportation to turn to if TARTA fails them, we must make sure a cross-section of the community is included in the discussion of what mass transit should be like in Toledo. TARTA already reaches out to the community with its listening sessions; that's good, and if we want to expand the system, such sessions should also be expanded with that goal in mind.

Broad community and leadership involvement is important for other reasons, too. As the transit advocates who wrote Reconnecting America's "Midsize Cities on the Move" argue, successfully implementing a major transit project takes "key champions and partnerships among relevant stakeholders." They urge that transit planning and land-use planning be integrated. That makes sense.

To the extent that transit projects target particular areas, such as downtown, and aim to improve them, we should consider finding ways to have those areas contribute to the projects' costs. In some jurisdictions, according to "Midsize Cities on the Move," special taxes have been imposed on the areas around transit projects. The people and businesses in these areas get a lot of the benefit, and it's fair for them to pay. Voluntary funding should also be considered. Either way, separate funding for new projects may help preserve the funding for conventional bus service.

But it is time to have a meaningful conversation about mass transit in Toledo, and in all of Lucas County. For, with the 22nd Century Committee's vision and downtown master plan, we are about to embark on land-use planning.

New modes of urban transit and a better basic TARTA are not mutually exclusive goals. The two objectives go hand in hand.