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Standing in the transit bread line

By: [Barbara Hollingsworth](#)

Examiner Columnist | 7/8/09 7:13 AM

He was outnumbered four-to-one at a Senate hearing on transportation and climate change, but nobody challenged CATO senior fellow Randall O'Toole's claim that rather than saving energy, mass transit uses massive amounts of it and produces copious amounts of greenhouse gas emissions to boot.

"Transit produces as much greenhouse gas emissions [per passenger mile] as the average SUV, and consumes far more energy," O'Toole told the Senate Banking Subcommittee on Housing, Transportation and Community Development. "Transit is the culprit, not the savior."

Neither of the two senators there - Chairman Robert Menendez, D-NJ, and Sen. Mark Warner, D-VA - nor any of four pro-transit witnesses who testified alongside O'Toole directly addressed his point.

And nobody produced data proving O'Toole wrong, even though the stated purpose of the hearing was to "chart a course towards lowering emissions in the transportation sector" - which accounts for nearly one third of all air pollution in the U.S.

When O'Toole noted that, besides being energy guzzlers and polluters, urban mass transit systems are typically "in a perpetual state of financial crisis" requiring massive taxpayer subsidies, Menendez cited the \$200 billion spent on highways over the last few decades. "That's a subsidy," he said.

No, senator, it's not. As Gabriel Roth, research fellow at the Independent Institute who was present at the hearing, told me afterwards, gasoline taxes and other highway user fees have paid for nearly 90 percent of all the costs of building and maintaining the nation's highway system.

In contrast, fares cover less than half of the operating costs and none of the capital costs associated with building and running mass transit.

A decades-long experiment in O'Toole's former hometown of Portland, Oregon, showed transit to be the loser in cost effectiveness as well. Portland spent \$2 billion on an extensive light rail system and dramatically increased operating subsidies in inflation-adjusted dollars, yet transit still lost market share. Forty years ago, 4 percent of Portland commuters took transit to work; today it's a pathetic 1.6 percent.

"And what they don't tell you," O'Toole told me, "is that the city spent another \$2 billion to subsidize transit-

oriented development. They have to build huge parking garages for the developers or it's not commercially viable."

Michael Replogle, policy and strategy consultant for the Environmental Defense Fund, told the subcommittee that even the draconian cap-and-trade provisions in the House-passed cap-and-trade bill will not be enough "to bring about an efficient reduction in transportation -related greenhouse gas emissions." But if the Senate passes a similar bill, electricity costs will skyrocket, dramatically increasing mass transit operating costs.

Since more than 90 percent of all urban travel is done by automobile anyway, O'Toole says, "small improvements in autos can be far more significant than large investments in transit."


If you're really serious about lowering carbon emissions, supporting mass transit doesn't make much sense. Neither does expanding passenger rail lines, which slurp up large quantities of coal-generated electricity, if your major goal is to decrease energy use.

But if you're part of the politically correct pro-transit lobby, you just ignore such inconvenient facts. With a new administration in town ready to hand out billions of tax dollars for prohibitively expensive rail projects that cannot be justified on the basis of cost, energy use or even carbon emissions, all you have to do is stand in the transit bread line and wait for your hand-out.

Barbara F. Hollingworth is The Examiner's local opinion editor.

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