

Matt Yglesias

Today at 8:28 am

Transportation Planning Requires Planning



Randall O’Toole is a relentless advocate for highways and automobile dependency in the United States. Consequently, I don’t agree with him about very much. But the thing I consistently find most bizarre about him, is that the Cato Institute and the Reason Foundation have both agreed to agree with O’Toole that his support for highways and automobile dependency is a species of *libertarianism*. For example, O’Toole whines a bunch about how Ray LaHood wants to spend less money on highways and more on transportation alternatives before [denouncing this agenda as “central planning.”](#)

Central planning, of course, is the reverse of libertarianism. So if promoting alternative transportation is central planning, then building highways everywhere must be freedom! But of course in the real world building highways *is also central planning*. The Long Island Expressway is not a free market phenomenon. The Interstate Highway System as a whole reflects, yes, planning. That’s how it works. And beyond the interstates, American cities made a collective decision in the early part of the twentieth century to totally reconfigure their streets so as to become more convenient for car traffic—they’d be paved in an auto-friendly way, and the streets divided into a (larger) cars-only portion and a (smaller) people-only portion. That’s planning. It’s true that proposals to rebalance and make more space for buses and bikes and streetcars and pedestrians is a sort of central planning. But so is the alternative.

It’s just a field that, intrinsically, requires a lot of planning. The question is about what kinds of plans to make.

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Filed under: [planning](#), [transportation](#),

30 Responses to “Transportation Planning Requires Planning”

1. *Ted* Says:

[May 29th, 2009 at 8:32 am](#)

I dunno, Matt. Sounds like socialism to me.

2. *V.* Says:

[May 29th, 2009 at 8:33 am](#)

These people rarely have a problem with the centrally-planned defense industry...

3. *Zephyrus* Says:

[May 29th, 2009 at 8:35 am](#)

I think most libertarians recognize that roads are a government project.

But they take the building of roads to be a coordination problem; the government simply acts as a coordinating agent that reduces transaction. And if you take as a token of faith that roads pay for themselves, it's not a macro-level distortion of the economy or economic geography. Public transit, in this view, qualifies as a distortion, because it's paid for from general revenue, which decreases consumption in and investment in non-public transit goods.

Not that I buy this view, but you elide the central issue.

4. *Joshua Herring* Says:

[May 29th, 2009 at 8:40 am](#)

Finally a post here I agree with. Yes, Libertarians are inconsistent here - and yes, keeping the highway system running is every bit as much central planning and preference tweaking as investments in public transportation and alternative energy, etc. That said, there are plenty of people at Cato who favor road privatization, so you may be mischaracterizing their stance a bit.

5. *mds* Says:

[May 29th, 2009 at 8:41 am](#)

And beyond the interstates, American cities made a collective decision in the early part of the twentieth century to totally reconfigure their streets so as to become more convenient for car traffic

Actually, it wasn't so much a collective decision *sui generis* as a process driven by ample bribery and muscle from, e.g., General Motors, which actively targeted mass transit and density. And since it's Cato, it's A-OK if the boot on your neck is being wielded by a *corporation* instead of an elected government.

6. *DTM* Says:

[May 29th, 2009 at 8:43 am](#)

Ironically, regardless of what else he may have thought about individual liberty versus tyranny, I'm pretty sure Cato the Younger would have understood the importance of the central planning of transportation infrastructure.

7. *Ted Says:*

[May 29th, 2009 at 8:49 am](#)

And let's not forget aqueducts! Cato would have been a huge fan.

8. *El Cid Says:*

[May 29th, 2009 at 8:50 am](#)

It's because cars are manly, and represent freedom, because one could drive anywhere, particularly if it's a convertible down a warm mid-Western rural highway just before sunset. As opposed to evil socialist collectivist transportation methods which cannot offer such solitary cinematic moments.

9. *Rich in PA Says:*

[May 29th, 2009 at 8:53 am](#)

El Cid: You're right, whether or not you intended to be. It's just a deeply-ingrained cultural bias for cars and roads.

10. *Billare Says:*

[May 29th, 2009 at 9:05 am](#)

It is the ideology of the central planning. Progressives favor one-size-fits-all solutions so that all must enjoy their utopian vision of walkable cities & neighborhoods. They would outlaw diversity in lifestyle choice that highway infrastructure spending offers; suburban living is wasteful, immoral, and racist. More importantly though, the funding and upkeep of the highway system is generally holding within a stable political equilibrium. Matt's New Ideas, will of course, require lots of patriotic tax-raising for high-tech train sets and reconfigured powers of zoning that inevitably increase the size of the government and worsens the problems inherent in central planning.

11. *Don Williams Says:*

[May 29th, 2009 at 9:07 am](#)

I think it is a matter of who benefits.

O'Toole is a tool who thinks real estate developers and owners of construction companies should be able to plot ..er.."plan" how they can get rich exploiting the public treasury for private gain –

as opposed to civil servants planning efficient systems that will provide valuable benefits and services to the common citizens at low costs.

12. *El Cid Says:*

[May 29th, 2009 at 9:10 am](#)

And you thought I was just snarking.

I just have to say, against the 'libertarian' asses who think their weird aesthetics must be accepted by everyone as 'liberty', twice I lived in metropolitan areas with comprehensive public transportation, and I never felt as free to develop my individual interests and capabilities as any time in which I have been more car-bound.

It's not a simple opposition, but the notion that it is somehow inherently more supportive of liberty and personal development to favor car-based and suburb-based development is ridiculous.

13. [Calvin Jones and the 13th Apostle](#) Says:

[May 29th, 2009 at 9:12 am](#)

Progressives favor one-size-fits-all solutions so that all must enjoy their utopian vision of walkable cities & neighborhoods.

Wrong, Sparky!! Most favor smarter policies. Besides, if you enjoy paying \$4/gallon for gas, more power to you. Some of us would like an alternative.

14. [DTM](#) Says:

[May 29th, 2009 at 9:13 am](#)

It's just a deeply-ingrained cultural bias for cars and roads.

I'm not sure this is at all true.

This country easily, even passionately, embraced trains back in the day. We still embrace airplanes. Where public land transportation is competitive in terms of price and convenience, we use it.

I think in the end, Americans are actually far more pragmatic about transportation than this cultural bias theory would suggest. Rather, I think this is a rationalization for what would otherwise be a naked transfer of wealth, from higher-density to lower-density population areas. In other words, the culture war, at least in this case, is really just cover for an economic war.

I also think the balance of power in this economic war is shifting, as the United States continues to urbanize. As Nate Silver pointed out in his *How Obama Really Won the Election* article for *Esquire*, in 1992 exit polls had Americans identifying themselves as 35% rural, 24% urban. In 2008, it was 30% urban, 21% rural. The “real America” of McCain-Palin was simply out of touch with the real real America, and a shift in transportation funding back to a multi-mode system that fairly serves the real real America is going to be just one of the many consequences of this fact.

15. [That Donkey Benjamin](#) Says:

[May 29th, 2009 at 9:19 am](#)

El Cid,

The distinction between positive and negative actions is useful here. As I stated before, maintenance and upkeep of the highway system is in a stable political equilibrium - costs will not explode, people will not have to radically alter their lifestyles in the near future for its perpetuation. Therefore your “supportive” is the wrong descriptive term to use; the proper one is “permissive”. Meanwhile, the future will not permit to me merely “accept” leftists’ grandiose schemes; I will be forced to pay for chronically bankrupt high-speed rail systems, forced to live in the urban sardine-box of the city, prohibited from enjoying the expanse of a large backyard, if I accept that mistaken characterization.

16. [SavageView](#) Says:

[May 29th, 2009 at 9:19 am](#)

It is the ideology of the central planning. Progressives favor one-size-fits-all solutions so that all must enjoy their utopian vision of walkable cities & neighborhoods. They would outlaw diversity in lifestyle choice that highway infrastructure spending offers; suburban living is wasteful, immoral, and racist. More importantly though, the funding and upkeep of the highway system is generally holding within a stable political equilibrium. Matt's New Ideas, will of course, require lots of patriotic tax-raising for high-tech train sets and

reconfigured powers of zoning that inevitably increase the size of the government and worsens the problems inherent in central planning.

I see writing style of content-free conjecture (a la McArdle) is also ingrained in security-state libertarians.

17. *ajay* Says:

[May 29th, 2009 at 9:19 am](#)

Actually, it wasn't so much a collective decision sui generis as a process driven by ample bribery and muscle

“sui generis” = “of a kind of its own” - i.e. unique, in a class by itself. “As a violinist, Itzhak Perlman is sui generis”.

“per se” = “by itself” or “in itself” or “themselves” - “forming the alliance was not an act of war per se, but it made war almost inevitable.”

“sensu stricto” = “in the strict sense” - “Al Gore has not been a politician, sensu stricto, since 2001, but he is none the less a man with considerable political influence”.

18. *DTM* Says:

[May 29th, 2009 at 9:23 am](#)

Progressives favor one-size-fits-all solutions so that all must enjoy their utopian vision of walkable cities & neighborhoods. They would outlaw diversity in lifestyle choice that highway infrastructure spending offers; suburban living is wasteful, immoral, and racist.

Actually, Matt's general theme is that we should eliminate most of the regulations that are designed to prohibit denser development, provide subsidies for things like transportation on the basis of sound economics, and then let people develop as they so choose. He does believe that would lead to more dense neighborhoods, but by choice, not coercion. And while Matt has historically been a little weak on the full range of what that could mean, recently he has come to understand a bit better than you can have suburbs that are also relatively dense and walkable, and served by both public transit AND roads/private vehicles.

More importantly though, the funding and upkeep of the highway system is generally holding within a stable political equilibrium.

But as I just pointed out, it is anything but a stable political equilibrium. The general trend of the U.S. population is toward ever-greater urbanization, and in recent years we have passed a tipping point where more voters see themselves as urban than rural.

19. *BruceMcF* Says:

[May 29th, 2009 at 9:26 am](#)

Billare, May 29th, 2009 at 9:05 am:

It is the ideology of the central planning. Progressives favor one-size-fits-all solutions so that all must enjoy their utopian vision of walkable cities & neighborhoods.

And also, we have always been at war against Eastasia.

The car system is *founded on* one size fits all central planning. Parking set aside requirements, zoning requiring single used separated residences in zoned residential areas, and of course the constant road expansion in the congestion ... roadworks ... residential development ... increased average VMT ... congestion cycle, underlaid by cross-subsidies from existing to greenfield utility provision, that the 20th century suburban development cycle fed upon.

And anyone who thinks that the ever-accumulating deficit in maintenance required to keep the auto-uber-alles system running is a “stable equilibrium” is throwing around big words either without knowing or without caring what they mean.

20. *Don Williams Says:*

[May 29th, 2009 at 9:31 am](#)

Of course, O’Toole’s masters can maintain the scam only by fudging the analysis.

Like only charging \$2.50 per gallon at the pump — and then charging another \$38 per gallon on the 1040 tax form. In order to get the money for military operations to protect Big Oil’s aggression overseas. Oh, and that money gets falsely labelled “defending the US Homeland”.

Or Like building low-mileage, over-priced, oil-leaking pieces of shit for decades — and then saying that the taxes of the common citizen need to be used to bail out the “free market”.

Some of the best gravy, of course, is in real estate. You have your whores on the County Supervisor Board pass zoning that bans farmers in the exurbs from subdividing their land and selling lots to the common citizens.

Then you wait until a farmer is on the verge of bankruptcy from property taxes, go in and buy his farm, get a rezoning to 1/8 acre lots from you buddies, and bingo: 1000 percent profit on you investment just for the paperwork. Minus the cut for the Supervisors, of course.

Then you put up a bunch of cheap shit, flimsy crackerjack houses and bleed the masses for all you can get — helped by your buddies at the local bank who pass out ARM mortgages to the masses that can be reset to loan shark rates later. After your banker buddy skims off the cream, he bails, the bank fails, and the FDIC get stuck with cleaning up the toxic waste.

All this low density urban sprawl, of course, puts enormous strain on the infrastructure. New roads, sewers, water lines and power lines are needed. Which your construction buddies supply –for a price.

Who pays — well, it’s sure as shit is not the real estate developers. Surtaxing that 1000 percent profit would be UnAmerican. The little people get buttfucked with the bill. Which is why Prince William County , VA outside Washington DC has the highest property taxes in Virginia –even though it is a miserable shithole whose roads are in perpetual gridlock.

Speaking of Prince William and Fairfax Counties, I left out the best part. If you get YOUR Senator to bring in a few “Defense” projects from DC, that is better than Viagra. \$100 Million from the US Treasury gets whipped into real money when it hits the local multiplier.

Best of all is that no one can challenge these blood-sucking leechs and parasites. It would be UnAmerican to attack the “free enterprise” system. Especially when its back is turned and its nose is buried deep in the public trough, slurping up the tax dollars. Wait until the fat hog comes up for air, so that it squeal loudly when you suggest it go on a diet.

21. *DTM Says:*

[May 29th, 2009 at 9:33 am](#)

The distinction between positive and negative actions is useful here. As I stated before, maintenance and upkeep of the highway system is in a stable political equilibrium - costs will not explode, people will not have to radically alter their lifestyles in the near future for its perpetuation.

Again, this is incorrect: the costs of using the existing road system is perpetually going up. Fuel prices are increasing in real terms. Population growth and concentration is leading to ever-greater congestion. Lifestyles are being changed already.

I will be . . . forced to live in the urban sardine-box of the city, prohibited from enjoying the expanse of a large backyard, if I accept that mistaken characterization.

If you want to argue about the economic merits of various transportation subsidies, fine. But this is nonsense: no one is going to force you to live in urban area or prohibit you from living on a large piece of land. You are just going to have to deal with the fact that by *choice*, your fellow Americans are continually urbanizing, and public funding priorities are going to start reflecting that fact.

22. *Billare* Says:

[May 29th, 2009 at 9:34 am](#)

BruceMcF,

I don't know what all those tedious sounding policies mean. I don't particularly care to, either, since I don't live in the city for a reason and am not particularly interested in urban affairs. You may crow about your greater technocratic understanding if you like.

All I want is the preservation of the the kind of lifestyle that many Americans enjoy, free from the all the bustle and high prices and crime of the city, to be preserved with as little impugning on my freedoms and pocketbook as possible. I understand that the movement of New Urbanism wants to devolve transportation decisions to the local level so that people who choose to can zone for walkable neighborhoods of their own - I am all for that sort of thing. But it is generally not in your political nature to provide unalloyed freedom for its sake without strings.

23. *Glen Tomkins* Says:

[May 29th, 2009 at 9:44 am](#)

Libertarianism is just Conservatism misspelled

The central planning, the govt intervention, that gave us an automobile-friendly nation, happened a couple of generations ago. Today's generation of the thoughtless grew up in a world in which the automobile friendliness was a given, was part of the state of nature, at least to those thoughtless enough to not question beyond the appearances of what has been presented to them as a given. Now, defending the status quo is not, when put baldly that way, a very attractive ideology. So when you can systematically misunderstand defending the status quo as defending the relationship of the individual to the state of nature, and from the encroachments of central planning, of course you go for the latter rationalization, I mean if you are inclined to the thoughtless defense of your immediate self-interest.

24. *mds* Says:

[May 29th, 2009 at 9:45 am](#)

“sui generis” = “of a kind of its own” - i.e. unique, in a class by itself. “As a violinist, Itzhak Perlman is sui generis”.

Yeah, I meant that the “collective decision” didn’t just arise from nowhere, independent of any other factors. People didn’t just awaken one morning with an inexplicable desire to destroy functioning streetcar systems and build more highways. As always when confronted by Latin scholastic philosophers in this matter, I will go hide behind Durkheim.

That said, there are plenty of people at Cato who favor road privatization, so you may be mischaracterizing their stance a bit.

Yes, taking existing major roads built and maintained for decades at public expense, already pay-per-use in what’s meant to be at cost to optimize the free flow of commerce, and turning them over to private profit-making entities is the free market in action. After all, Hoosiers are free to build another Interstate 80/90 if they don’t like how foreign investors are running the current one. Bonus if they use eminent domain to do it, since Cato is a *big* fan of that. What is the sound of one invisible hand wanking?

25. *Don Williams* Says:

[May 29th, 2009 at 9:50 am](#)

Let’s be very clear about one thing: The commercial class which runs the Republican Party — the real estate developers, the construction company owners, the defense corporations, Big Oil, etc — are not really businessmen. That is one of the myths created by their propaganda whores.

Dick Cheney was not installed as CEO at Halliburton because he knew a lot about finding oil or running a corporation — he was installed because he was a Long Time POLITICAL FIXER for Big Oil.

Similarly, most Republican donors don’t hate government — a parasite doesn’t hate the host on which it feeds. They EXPLOIT government for their private profit. They are the LAST people to be entrepreneurs or to create something new. To provide value vice extort a cut. To compete vice rig a bid.

Look at Newt Gingrich’s deeply deceitful “get government off the backs of the people” campaign. He didn’t move power back to the States — pigs will fly before any Republican Congressman ever gives up the right to rig the rules of business in order to extort money from K Street.

Rather, Newt Gingrich dumped responsibility of caring for the poor, the sick and the young onto the states —because there’s no campaign dollars in those groups. But when it came to “regulating interstate commerce” the Republican Party was open for business.

26. *DTM* Says:

[May 29th, 2009 at 9:53 am](#)

I understand that the movement of New Urbanism wants to devolve transportation decisions to the local level so that people who choose to can zone for walkable neighborhoods of their own - I am all for that sort of thing. But it is generally not in your political nature to provide unalloyed freedom for its sake without strings.

As opposed to “the political nature” of the people who created all those restrictions on what other people could do with their land in the first place?

Libertarian-minded people are a small minority in the United States. That is true in the cities, in the suburbs, and in rural areas. So the idea that somehow the suburbs and libertarianism go hand-in-hand is purely a byproduct of where most American libertarians happen to come from.

27. *Don Williams* Says:

[May 29th, 2009 at 10:00 am](#)

One of the biggest lies in the News today is that the “Real Estate Bubble” was an accident. A natural disaster, like a hurricane.

Which is bullshit. It was PLANNED. In the late 1990s. Why spend money to elect a fool like George Bush if you ain't going to get that money back ten-fold?

LOOK at who profited. Real Estate. Bankers. Southern construction suppliers like Georgia Pacific and Home Depot. Big Oil. Big Defense –insofar as it grabbed oil deposits for Big Oil.

Who do you think contributed to the Republicans?

Who lost? Well, whoever gets stuck with paying off that \$6 TRILLION bar tab dry drunk George W ran up. I'll give you a hint: He Stole \$3 Trillion from the Social Security Trust Fund and let an IOU in your account.

28. *El Cid* Says:

[May 29th, 2009 at 10:01 am](#)

The distinction between positive and negative actions is useful here. As I stated before, maintenance and upkeep of the highway system is in a stable political equilibrium - costs will not explode, people will not have to radically alter their lifestyles in the near future for its perpetuation. Therefore your “supportive” is the wrong descriptive term to use; the proper one is “permissive”. Meanwhile, the future will not permit to me merely “accept” leftists' grandiose schemes; I will be forced to pay for chronically bankrupt high-speed rail systems, forced to live in the urban sardine-box of the city, prohibited from enjoying the expanse of a large backyard, if I accept that mistaken characterization.

And ‘libertarians’ are free to keep convincing themselves that this sort of pseudo-philosophical argument is based on anything other than weird libertarian aesthetics, and you can keep demanding that people who don't accept your horse shit will please re-define “supportive” as “permissive”, since you shit liberty and piss whiskey.

29. *chuckles the clown* Says:

[May 29th, 2009 at 10:11 am](#)

Randall is a huge O'Toole.

30. *Don Williams* Says:

[May 29th, 2009 at 10:18 am](#)

It is moronic to suggest that a technologically advanced, deeply complex civilization of 300+ Million people can survive without planning.

It is about time CATO and the libertarians were challenged on this deceitful intellectual scam they have been running for decades.

This is always planning. Anyone who's been in Washington knows that there is little damm difference between the US Congress and the old Soviet Union Politburo.

The issue is WHO plans –and for WHOSE benefit.

Do whores for the plutocrats plot in back rooms for private gain — at the cost of the common citizen.

Or do we plan in the public forum —for the common good?

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