

Don't judge rail report by its partisan cover

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When it comes to attention-grabbing covers, the title "Great Rail Disasters" with an illustration of a train wreck is tough to beat for creating a sense of danger and drama.

Inside, the 44-page American Dream Coalition report focuses on "foolish investments" and "pork barrel spending" in a critique of rail as a passenger transportation alternative.

Last summer, the Gainesville-based coalition that lobbies for political support for automobile use and home ownership published "Why Florida Should Not Build High Speed Rail," a 29-page sequel to its 2004 and 2005 studies, including the chapter "Bullet Trains to Bankruptcy."

For every in-depth, statistically laden report by think tanks such as the Reason Foundation, Heritage Foundation and Cato Institute that challenge rail transportation, there's an equally cogent, heavily researched study that makes the opposite case.

The Washington-based Center for Transportation Excellence, for example, posts a point-and-counterpoint summary of rail issues at www.cfte.org/critics/what.asp, stating that public transportation critics can be influenced by personal beliefs, political agendas or potential harm to an industry they represent.

The Midwest High Speed Rail Association published a fact versus fiction list to support high-speed rail, including a response to this Cato Institute statement in July: "No high speed rail in the United States will ever pay its operating, much less capital costs."

The rail association argued that Amtrak's high-speed Acela, between Boston and Washington, covers operating costs, and that revenue from proposed high speed lines in California and Florida would exceed annual expenses.

So what's a resident who wants to make an informed decision about paying for it to do?

That question will become increasingly relevant in the Tampa Bay area. Hillsborough County voters are expected to vote in November on a referendum to add a 1-cent surcharge to pay for the area's first light rail system and other transportation improvements.

Within weeks, the Obama administration is expected to reveal its decision on whether Florida will get federal stimulus money for a high-speed rail line between Tampa and Orlando. But if the state gets only a portion of the \$2.6 billion it seeks, Floridians are likely to be asked for additional financial and lobbying support.

"All of this can be confusing, admittedly so," said Ed Braddy, executive director of the American Dream

Coalition, who parlayed experience from a sometimes confrontational position on the Gainesville City Commission to his current role after reaching term limits.

"One of the key things people should try to do on these issues is to take an 'apples to apples' comparison," Braddy said. "Statistics can be squeezed in ways to give many types of answers."

Todd Litman, executive director of the Victoria Transport Policy Institute in British Columbia, published a 55-page report on "Evaluating Rail Transit Criticism" in September, including point-by-point challenges to "Great Rail Disasters."

"People have done a pretty good job of making money by telling people what they like to hear," Litman said. He cited the libertarian Reason Foundation for making arguments that validate the idea of auto dependence and sprawl.

"Then when it becomes a pro-con argument, people in the media profession try to get two sides of a story," Litman said. That can result in positions that may not be valid getting the same exposure as those passing the muster of scientific rigor, he said.

Litman suggested that people trying to formulate an opinion on a transit option ask whether the argument leads toward a goal.

"It's easy to be critical of a point when you don't have to come up with a solution to a problem," Litman said.

Advocates and critics of the area's high-speed rail and light rail proposals have raised myriad points supporting and opposing new rail networks.

The following are among the most common rail transit issues nationwide, which the American Dream Coalition has cited in its reports. Background about the local situation is provided from recent Tribune news reports:

- Can rail transit reduce rush-hour freeway congestion?

Coalition's claim: Some rail transit lines may have a marginal effect on congestion, but the cost is "exorbitant." Beyond New York and a few other cities, rail transit carries too few people to noticeably reduce congestion.

Bay area issue: A study by the Texas Transportation Institute ranked Bay area highway congestion as the 11th worst nationwide, with drivers spending an average of 47 hours a year in traffic.

That indicates local motorists feel the impact of congestion. But in their rail project guidelines, federal officials do not include congestion reduction as a major justification for funding.

Local officials generally focus on the alternatives intercity high-speed rail and local light rail would provide to avoid the highway congestion, rather than what impact rail transit would have on interstate congestion.

- Should rail be subsidized as a transportation alternative since highways have long been subsidized?

Coalition's claim: Net subsidies to highways in 2006 were \$25.1 billion, based on a Federal Highway Administration report, or a half-penny per passenger mile, compared with public transit subsidies of 61 cents per passenger mile, according to a Federal Transit Administration report.

Bay area issue: State officials cite investment reports by two consultants, reviewed by a University of South Florida team, that project high-speed rail revenue will cover operational costs, so there would not be a need for a public subsidy beyond the \$2.6 billion in federal money that would be provide to build and equip the system.

For light rail, Hillsborough County taxpayers will determine whether a 1-cent sales tax, which would also provide other mobility funding, is worth approving in hopes local transportation will improve. Approval of the surcharge would indicate a commitment to backing light rail to federal authorities, who could provide some degree of matching funds. Detailed cost estimates are not available.

Planners say there is no more space for interstate expansion to alleviate future congestion. During the past 30 years, the Bay area population and commute delays have more than doubled, the Tampa Bay Area Regional Transportation Authority reported. By 2050, the population is expected to double again, and traffic congestion is expected to triple, TBARTA said.

- Will rail promote economic development?

Coalition's claim: Rail is not a catalyst to economic development, but it feeds subsidies for economic development. It says tax waivers are required to promote highly touted "transit oriented development" property value increases that rail proponents cite.

Bay area issue: As one of a handful of major U.S. cities without local rail alternatives, Tampa competes with cities such as Charlotte, N.C., that offer rail as part of commuting and livability packages for business retention, expansion and recruitment.

Former Charlotte Mayor Patrick McCrory said in a November visit to Tampa that his city has enjoyed a big recruiting advantage over cities without rail transit systems.

- Will mass transportation save energy and energy costs?

Coalition's claim: Buses consume as much energy per passenger mile as sport utility vehicles and light trucks, while Amtrak fuel usage fares a little better than domestic airline flights, a claim Amtrak and other rail operators dispute.

Bay area issue: Much residential development is sprawled beyond employment centers, so changes in fuel costs can play a major role in household budgets. Amtrak and the Hillsborough Area Regional Transit Authority posted record ridership in Tampa in 2008 when fuel costs soared.

- Is rail transit faster than auto traffic?

Coalition's claim: Although top speeds for light rail trains can reach 55 mph, the average speed is more like 20 mph, lower than what would likely be the average speed of an auto.

Bay area issue: Specific routes have not been chosen for light rail lines in Tampa, but it is possible that local light rail lines would cross city streets as they do in downtown Portland, Ore.; Denver; and Buffalo, N.Y.; requiring lower speeds.

High-speed rail between Tampa and Disney would take 38 minutes station to station, but connection times must be added at both ends of the trip.

RAIL SYSTEMS DEFINED

Light rail - Resembles modern streetcar with up to four cars powered by overhead electric wires. Portland, Ore.; Charlotte, N.C.; and Denver; are among widely known U.S. systems.

Commuter rail - Trains with heavy rail cars, often with two levels and powered by diesel locomotives. Tri-Rail, which links Miami, Fort Lauderdale and West Palm Beach, is an example. Chicago and Toronto are among successful commuter rail lines.

Regular train - Amtrak operates standard coach and sleeper cars on the daily Silver Star between New York and Miami through Tampa.

High Speed Rail - The Acela, Amtrak's only U.S. high-speed train, links Boston and Washington. Proposed Tampa-Orlando rail would be electric powered.