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BRENT BATTEN

BRENT BATTEN: PASSENGER RAIL IN SOUTHWEST FLORIDA: DON'T GO THERE

By BRENT BATTEN

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LEE COUNTY — When it comes to Southwest Florida, commuter rail doesn't go there.

There are a couple of ways you can interpret that statement. It doesn't go there, as in there are no destinations, and it doesn't go there, as in it doesn't fit.

Both of them are accurate.

The Lee County Metropolitan Planning Organization has applied for \$48 million in federal stimulus money as a first step in making commuter rail a reality but before it spends, or even receives the money, the cold reality of rail ought to be observed.

Commuter rail, except perhaps for some very dense areas such as New York City, aren't practical.

Trains can only go where the tracks are. If tracks run a few blocks from your home and a few blocks from where you work, you might be tempted to ride the train rather than drive. But Southwest Florida, with its sprawling nature, doesn't fit that template.

Buses on the other hand, can go wherever there's a road.

Randal O'Toole is a transportation analyst with the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C., and an admitted skeptic of commuter rail service.

"We've got a nice infrastructure system. It's called the highway. We've got buses that easily haul more than the number of people who we'll ever care to move in Naples, Florida," O'Toole said.

He points to a study by the General Accounting Office (<http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d01984.pdf>) that indicates bus rapid transit systems can be created at about a third of per-mile cost of light rail systems.

The same report puts the per passenger mile cost of operating a rail system compared to a bus system in six cities studied anywhere from slightly higher in San Diego (\$4.20 to \$3.86) to more than seven times higher in Dallas (\$12.54 to \$1.74). With per mile costs like those, one has to wonder if either rail or bus service makes sense. You could pay for a taxi ride for every person who needs one at those rates.

But stimulus money is out there for mass transit and O'Toole says he's seeing more and more instances of communities going after it.

Like many of the stimulus earmarks, the claim that the expenditure will stimulate the economy is dubious. Sure,

some consultants will get jobs and if the idea progresses, some construction workers and factory hands may get work as well. But the end result of their labors is bound to be an expensive white elephant that is little used and carries continuing maintenance costs.

“It’s like building a bridge to nowhere,” O’Toole said. “You get the jobs to build the bridge. If you build a bridge to somewhere, construction workers get jobs and then people drive across it and say, ‘Hey, there’s land over here,’ and they build some more things.”

With cars becoming more and more fuel efficient, even the argument that rail systems are better for the environment is losing steam. “If we want to save energy and reduce greenhouse gases, automotive improvements such as hybrid-electric cars can do far more at a far lower cost than even the best rail projects,” O’Toole said.

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