

PUBLIC TRANSIT

Portland Public Transit Provides Lesson for Boise, Pundit Warns

"Portland's Chief Neo-Libertarian Critic" talks about Boise's streetcar.

By Sharon Fisher, 11-11-09

Public transit, such as Boise's proposed streetcar, is bad for the economy and bad for the environment. Just ask Randal O'Toole, who works on urban growth, public land, and transportation issues at the Cato Institute, and who spoke in Boise today about public transit based on his experiences in Portland.

O'Toole's talk in Boise was sponsored by the Idaho Freedom Foundation. The IFF is headed by Wayne Hoffman, a former reporter for the *Idaho Statesman* and *Idaho*



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Press-Tribune—"a less honorable profession," he said—who has worked for Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Luna and the Idaho Department of Agriculture, as well as heading up Idaho Young Republicans and acting as spokesman for former Republican Idaho Congressman Bill Sali. Hoffman described the IFF as a "nonprofit nonpartisan free-market think tank."

The event—held, incidentally, in a chain restaurant rather than in a locally owned business—was standing-room only, though apparently members of some Republican organizations received subsidized attendance. Attendees included Lieutenant Governor Brad Little, Representative Pete Nielsen (R-Mountain Home), and Boise City Council candidate Dave Litster, whose primary campaign issue was the streetcar, and who was asking attendees to sign his petition requiring it to come to a vote of the people.

As noted by his critics, O'Toole has made a career out of debunking Portland, the darling of urban planners. Which I guess makes him the darling of anti-urban planners. His website is even called "The Antiplanner."

That's not to say O'Toole didn't have some good points, most notably that funding light rail by cutting buses doesn't work. Buses offer a number of advantages over rail transit, such as flexibility—particularly in smaller cities such as Boise and Eugene, Ore. And certainly there is a great deal of controversy about the degree to which the streetcar system as proposed will serve Boise.

The problem is that, as described by a Congress for the New Urbanism report responding to O'Toole's Portland study, "O'Toole's attacks on Portland often miss the mark by distorting and misrepresenting data." His talk in Boise was no exception.

* O'Toole cited a number of statistics about public transit in Portland showing that it was going down, that more people were driving to work, and so on. Aside from the fact that this was debunked at great length in the Congress for New Urbanism report, his statistics all ended in 2007, and didn't include 2008—when \$4 a gallon gas prices drove a lot of people from their cars. In addition, the same *Portland Business Alliance* he cited for his 2007 numbers noted that that in 2008, 44 percent of people took public transit whereas 45 percent drove—37 percent alone, 8 percent in carpools.

* O'Toole said that much of the Portland streetcar system went through urban renewal districts, which through their use of tax-increment financing were "stealing money from fire departments, police, and schools." Well, not exactly. The reason it's called "increment" financing is that some percentage of taxes on the *additional value* of the property in the district goes toward urban renewal. The taxes collected on the original value of the property can still go to the same fire departments, police stations, and schools where they always went.

* During the Q&A session, one person asked about public transit in the San Francisco Bay Area, specifically about commuter rail. O'Toole chose to interpret that to mean the *Altamont Commuter Express*, a train that started in 1998 to connect San Jose to Stockton. He went on to call it a "disaster," with only three or four trains running every morning and a few hundred people riding it. And that's true—it offers four trains daily in each direction with an average daily ridership of 3,700. However, he did not mention *Caltrain*, the commuter rail system between San Francisco and San Jose, which offers 90 weekday trains and serves almost 40,000 people per day.

* O'Toole spoke favorably of several privately-operated transit systems, such as the Atlantic City jitney and the Puerto Rico Publico. "To make a profit, you have to be private," he said. Well, obviously if a private company can make a profit at it, more power to it. Surely he's not suggesting that the government should be competing with private companies to make a profit? That's why government gets involved in the first place: because there is a

public need that is not efficient for a private company to fill.

* "What about when gas goes to \$5 or \$10 a gallon?" asked one attendee. In an amazing coincidence, O'Toole not only had all sorts of figures at hand about public transit in Europe, where gas is indeed that price, but already had half a dozen slides about it queued up in his Powerpoint presentation.

* O'Toole claimed that driving costs 24 cents per passenger mile, which includes the car itself, maintenance, repair, insurance, taxes, and road subsidies. He did not say where he got this figure. In comparison, according to the *American Automobile Association*, average costs per mile are 45.3 to 70.7 cents, *without* including road subsidies.

The other problem is that much of O'Toole's argument was couched in political terms that are unrealistic, to say the least. Not only did he believe that transit should be privatized, but roads should as well, he said. In addition, not only was the current recession caused by urban planners—because their policies created the housing bubble—but called them planning czars who were trying to use social engineering to dictate how and where we live, such as forcing us to live in Soviet-style apartment buildings against our will. He emphasized this by including shots of Moscow (the Russian one, not the northern Idaho one) and East Germany and pretending at first to think they were Portland.

But when Ada County Commissioner and gubernatorial candidate Sharon Ullman asked him whether he'd looked at the Boise streetcar proposal specifically, O'Toole admitted he wasn't particularly familiar with it.