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Forum: Transit isn't transportation solution

By BENITA M. DODD - Athens Banner-Herald Published Sunday, May 23, 2010

Cato Institute Senior Fellow Randal O'Toole's recent visit to Atlanta was to talk about getting Georgians out of gridlock, and he proposed solutions. He talked a lot about "big-box" transit, about trains, about transit-oriented development and tax increment financing. None of those were O'Toole's proposed congestion solutions, but he named several that "fit to a T" and are worth expanding upon.



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Timing traffic lights: Poorly timed traffic light signals cause congestion and needless delays. Synchronizing signals not only improves the flow and speed of traffic, it improves fuel efficiency and air quality. The Texas Traffic Light Synchronization program reduced delays by 24.6 percent, fuel consumption by 9.1 percent and stops by 14.2 percent. Along an 11-intersection arterial road in Saint Augustine, Fla., arterial delays were reduced 36 percent, travel time 10 percent and stops by a whopping 49

percent. And in Georgia, Alpharetta reported a 31 percent reduction in delays, 17 percent reduction in travel time, 23 percent reduction in stops and 8 percent fuel savings - after one year of the program.

Signal improvements reduce delays for cars and can give priority access to emergency vehicles and public transit. Improving transit travel time is no small consideration for metro Atlanta - where a demonstration high-occupancy toll (HOT) lane project on Interstate 85 aims also to improve express bus transit times - because there is little incentive to ride the bus if it's caught in the same traffic as single-occupancy vehicles on surface streets.

Tolling: Tolloed roads serve as "congestion insurance." O'Toole dismisses the "Lexus lane" description of foes of toll roads, citing the example of a parent with a child in day care. Do you pay the center \$5 for every minute you're late, or the \$3 toll that ensures you a congestion-free drive to pick up your child on time? Too, in these constrained budgetary times with a federal Department of Transportation under orders to focus on "livability" rather than mobility, private-sector financed toll roads deliver the benefits of enhanced capacity earlier. The companies, which assume the risk, are motivated to produce a quality project to draw customers, to do it under budget and on deadline, and the road remains with taxpayers at the end of the contract with the government. If the company fails, the infrastructure returns to government control.

Georgia's managed lane system for high-occupancy vehicles - two or more occupants can travel in the HOV lanes in the metro Atlanta area - has not encouraged carpooling. Far better use is a HOT lane express network, where solo motorists can choose to pay for a congestion-free trip, buses become more attractive by traveling out of the congested "regular" lanes and traffic diverted to the express lanes relieves traffic congestion in the regular lanes. The traffic flow is monitored and pricing is "dynamic," changing depending on the time of day, day of the week or level of congestion.

Technology: The extent of technology's role in improving transportation is awe-inspiring. It begins with telecommuting and moves on to greater fuel efficiency and alternative fuels. It continues with Intelligent Transportation Systems such as Georgia Navigator, which provides travel times and incident and weather alerts, cell phones that text real-time updates on transit schedules and global positioning systems that give real-time traffic information and suggest

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alternate routes. It culminates - for now - in O'Toole's amazing demonstration of driverless vehicles.

The technological advances are already evident in "robocars" that help their drivers parallel park and automatically maintain a safe distance from the vehicle ahead. Consider the benefits of a driverless vehicle. Nonrecurring congestion accounts for 58 percent of the congestion in metro Atlanta, and more than half of that is caused by crashes, stalls and debris. Another 27 percent is weather-related. Recurring congestion, caused by bottlenecks, poor operations such as signal timing, or capacity challenges, is responsible for 42 percent of the congestion.

Government is headed in the wrong direction, with transit options that take travelers back in time - street cars, trams, big buses and not-so-high-speed passenger rail. But the future is upon us: Technology, tolls and timing signals are just some of the tools improving travel, safety and choice for Americans, while ensuring the flexibility to accommodate the vast terrain, pressing schedules and varied needs.

• Benita M. Dodd is vice president of the Georgia Public Policy Foundation, an independent think tank that proposes practical, market-oriented approaches to public policy issues.

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Posted by: [Learner](#) at May. 23, 2010 at 9:46:52 am

Timed signals have been in operation in Denver for a long time. The traffic maintains a nearly constant speed from suburbs to downtown while cross traffic also moves freely. There is considerable individual operator barrier to speeding as the locals know that driving smoothly at the speed limit is a non-stressful transit.

Posted by: [jdg1385](#) at May. 23, 2010 at 11:47:51 am

I'd like to see someone develop an intelligent traffic signal as well. Nothing more annoying than pulling up to a red signal late at night, with no other traffic on the road, and having to wait for the light to turn green....

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