

# Greater Greater Washington

The Washington, DC area is great. But it could be **greater**.

DEVELOPMENT

## Is CATO turning around?

by [Dan M.](#) • August 19, 2010 2:01 pm

The [CATO Institute](#) is one of the leading Libertarian think tanks in the country, but they have long had a big problem. Their foremost writer on transportation and urbanism, Randal O'Toole, [doesn't actually believe in Libertarianism](#).

Although he never uses these exact words, his basic position on all things urban is that '*a large portion of the market prefers auto-oriented suburbia, therefore the state should mandate and heavily subsidize auto-oriented suburbia*' ([here's a recent example](#)).

It's a profoundly anti-Libertarian position, and it has tarnished CATO's reputation in the field for years. How can they be taken seriously in discussions about cities when their senior fellow on the subject is such an obvious hypocrite?

It is gratifying, then, to find other CATO writers speaking more reasonably about the subject. On Tuesday, CATO published a blog post by writer Timothy Lee titled [Free Parking and the Geography of Cities](#), in which Lee makes the well-founded point that government regulations requiring large amounts of parking in every development inherently make walking impractical, which discourages people from walking, which encourages car use, and that therefore such regulations manipulate the free market.

Progressive blogger Matt Yglesias [agrees, and notes](#) that such manipulations instigate a "feedback loop" in which every car-oriented development increases the impracticality of walking, which in turn begets more car-oriented development.

These ideas are a [key part of contemporary urban planning](#). It has long been a mystery to planners why, at least on this issue, Libertarian groups like CATO should be opponents rather than allies.

Lee's piece is just one blog post, but hopefully it is representative of a shift at CATO away from O'Toole-style reactionism against change, and towards a more intellectually honest assessment of what a genuine free market would actually mean for our built environment.

*Hat tip to Ryan Avent for [succinctly summing up O'Toole's position](#).*



Cross-posted at [BeyondDC](#).



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## Comments

For what it's worth, O'Toole believes the solution to traffic and congestion is a system of computerized driverless robocars — you can read about it in the new book CATO published for him.

by [Rob](#) on Aug 19, 2010 2:06 pm [🗨️](#)

But HSR is too pie-in-the-sky futuristic. Amen to Ryan Avent's previous tweet. O'Toole is indeed an embarrassment to true Libertarians. Went to a talk by Reason Foundation's Sam Staley - a libertarian with insightful, intellectually robust arguments for truly market-based transportation options.

by [Erik W](#) on Aug 19, 2010 2:14 pm [🗨️](#)

"Zoned Out," by Jonathan Levine, is an excellent book about the odd relationship between libertarianism and typical suburban development.

by [Cameron](#) on Aug 19, 2010 2:42 pm [🗨️](#)

