

## Transit bashers blissfully ignore the bigger picture



BY CONRAD DEFIEBRE, MINNESOTA 2020  
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According to a leading conservative transit critic, riders on a commuter rail service in Nashville, Tenn., are so heavily subsidized that the same government money could buy each of them a new \$25,000 Toyota Prius.

Whatever the relative merits of a safe, comfortable railroad car versus a lightweight hybrid sedan with a sticky accelerator, the train, called the Music City Star, sounds like a pretty bad deal for the poor taxpayer. That is, until you think through the real implications of the alternative.

For starters, all those Priuses would ply highways subsidized by nonuser taxes to a far greater extent than transit could ever hope for—\$67.7 billion across the nation in 2007 alone. They would add to congestion that imposes hidden taxes on all motorists in the form of wasted time and fuel.

There would have to be more parking places, more police to enforce traffic laws, and more fire and rescue crews to respond to crashes. And, because their fuel economy is rated at 50 miles per gallon, the Toyota hybrids' contributions to road and bridge building and maintenance via fuel taxes would fall woefully short of the costs they incur.

Now, it's possible that Cato Institute analyst Randal O'Toole, dubbed the "anti-public transit contrarian" in a recent profile in the Minnesota business daily Finance & Commerce, had his tongue in cheek when proposing the Prius giveaway. The same might have been said for the Merry Pranksters of the Taxpayers League of Minnesota when they suggested providing a used car to each of the Twin Cities' 200,000-plus daily bus and rail riders during a transit drivers' strike a few years back.

But regardless of how serious these relentless transit bashers are about free autos for strap-hangers, their arguments rest on an all-too-facile fallacy—that driving is the only way anyone should get around town. I call it auto-centric thinking, which insists that the private car was ordained by nature and free markets to be everyone's travel choice. That leads to resentment of government support for transit, bicyclists and pedestrians as theft from "real" transportation infrastructure—roads and bridges.

In 21st century America, you can fool some of the people some of the time with this nonsense. That's because a great majority of us do drive practically everywhere, and most of us aren't happy about pothole-infested roads, traffic gridlock and falling bridges. And driving's dominance will persist as long as nearly half of U.S. households have no reasonable access to transit.

This is fertile ground for "conservative" demagoguery that transit equals socialism and driving is the epitome of American rugged individualism. But, as the late Paul M. Weyrich and William S. Lind of the conservative Free Congress Foundation pointed out, "the rise of the automobile is not a free-market outcome. Rather, it is the result of massive government intervention on the automobile's behalf."

How massive? According to Weyrich and Lind, the \$67.7 billion in nonuser tax subsidies for driving in 2007 tallied by the Pew Trust's Subsidyscope project barely scratch the surface. In their 2009 book "Moving Minds: Conservatives and Public Transportation," the two cited total annual social costs for motor vehicle users of \$439 billion to \$1 trillion more than their user fees. The comparable figure for transit? \$17.1 billion, or between 1.7 percent and 3.9 percent of driving's full subsidies.

This inconvenient truth continues to be blissfully ignored by conservatives who believe that bashing transit is a fine way to stir up their political base. Even that notion gets debunked by Weyrich and Lind, who note that transit serves a wide range of income groups, not just the urban poor. In fact, they say, transit serves many conservative goals, including job growth, economic efficiency, reducing freeway congestion and building a sense of community. Those are ideals progressives will gladly adopt as well.

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