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Barbara Hollingsworth: Moving past the traffic congestion debate

By: [Barbara Hollingsworth](#)

Examiner Columnist

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More mass transit or more highways? The solution to the Washington area's legendary traffic congestion is almost always posed as an either/or proposition.

The real answer is "neither," according to Randal O'Toole, senior fellow at the Cato Institute and author of the recently released "Gridlock: Why We're Stuck in Traffic and What To Do About It."

The fundamental reason it's so hard to get around these days is that America's surface transportation network "is based on technologies that are more than a half century old," O'Toole said during a recent Cato seminar on transportation issues. And that's just the automobiles. Rail transit was cutting edge in 1890.

"America is on the verge of a transportation revolution and nobody knows about it," O'Toole said. "It's not high-speed rail, streetcars, or any other form of collective transportation. That's obsolete."

The wave of the future, O'Toole said, is "smart" computerized cars and sensor-equipped highways that will automatically move high volumes of vehicles along at high speed. The motto for this futuristic scenario could be a variation of Greyhound Bus' iconic advertising slogan: "Leave the driving to us."

Today's highways can handle about 2,000 vehicles per hour. Road capacity could quadruple by 2030 using existing driverless technology, O'Toole said. A consortium including the University of California, the California Department of Transportation, and General Motors successfully demonstrated the concept in 1997 on Interstate 15 in San Diego, where eight driverless Buicks were kept safely in their lanes at 60 mph just one car length apart.

"Driverless cars are no more than a software upgrade," O'Toole says. "The main obstacles are bureaucratic and institutional, not technical. Even if the new technology could handle only 4,000 vehicles per hour, it would double our freeway space. This is a way out of the endless debate over existing roads."

Retrofitting cars and highways will cost money, but so will President Obama's plan to spend billions on mass transit and high-speed rail that will ultimately serve only a small fraction of the population while doing nothing to ease road congestion.

As O'Toole points out in his book, despite 165 mph high-speed rail in Europe, draconian taxes on cars and fuel, and huge government subsidies for rail in the European Union, rail's overall travel share has actually been declining there for a decade. O'Toole quotes European Parliament member Ari Vatanen, who said at a 2005 conference that "not a single high-speed track built to date has had any perceptible impact on the road traffic carried by parallel motorways."

Yet Obama still plans to spend billions on high-speed rail, even though O'Toole's landmark analysis proved that mass transit actually produces more greenhouse emissions per passenger mile than a typical family sport utility vehicle.

Because they have the potential to revolutionize American society, O'Toole believes that driverless cars will be introduced on private roads first, and then be gradually adopted by government as the economic benefits become obvious.

He attributes U.S. prosperity to America's "mobility advantage" -- pointing out that mobility gives us the ability to access jobs, stores and other amenities of life for two-thirds less per vehicle than mass transit.


Cars, he says, are also "one of the highest incarnations of personal freedom ever developed."

Despite government attempts, O'Toole is betting that the most mobile society in human history will refuse to willingly relinquish that freedom -- even if it means handing over the steering wheel for a while.

Barbara F. Hollingsworth is The Examiner's local opinion editor.

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