

"Great Rail Disasters:" Same Old, Same Old

by Paul M. Weyrich and William S. Lind

Whenever the anti-transit troubadours come out with a new study, we react with excitement. Will this one finally have something new to say? Or will it be just more of the same old stuff -- bad numbers, phony arguments, apples to aardvarks comparisons and plain old BS? Sadly, Randal O'Toole's latest release, "Great Rail Disasters," is just *deja vu* all over again. A better title might be, "Great Study Disasters." It seems that the infinite number of monkeys at the infinite number of typewriters still can't write Shakespeare, or Thomas Conway for that matter.

A quick "smell test" usually proves a pretty good indicator: does the new study rely on the infamous "Pickrell studies," which purported to "prove" that all new rail systems underestimated costs and overestimated ridership? "Great Rail Disasters" reeks of Pickrell in footnote after footnote. As Todd Litman of the Victoria Transport Policy Institute writes in a rebuttal to O'Toole,

Much of the criticism of excessive costs and exaggerated ridership projections is based on a fifteen-year-old report (Pickrell, 1989 and 1992), which used case studies that were themselves five to ten years old. Even when it was published the report was considered dated, since transit planning policy changes had already corrected many of the problems Pickrell identified. Yet, the [O'Toole] report uses the present tense when describing these problems . . . The report ignores more recent rail transit systems that have been built within budget and [have] higher than expected ridership, such as Salt Lake City, Denver and St. Louis.

Other games that "Great Rail Disasters" continues to play include:

- Pretending that buses and rail transit are interchangeable. This is one of those apples to aardvarks comparisons. Buses and rail transit serve different markets and different purposes. Buses primarily serve the transit-dependent, people who do not drive or have no car available; in all but a few situations, they have little ability to draw riders from choice. Rail transit can and does draw riders from choice, people who have a car and can drive. This means that rail transit, but not buses, reduces traffic congestion in rush hour. Also, while buses have little or no effect on economic development, rail transit lines often create billions of dollars in new development.
- Advocating more highways as the solution to urban traffic congestion. Not only does this ignore the problem of induced demand, it neglects the effects that limited-access highways have on urban areas, most of which are negative, some powerfully so. More and more cities today are tearing down limited-access urban highways so as to reopen and re-unite the city (Cleveland's Shoreway seems next on the list).
- Using bad numbers. O'Toole says, for example, that "Freeway construction costs average \$5 to \$10 million per lane mile." In Kansas, maybe, but not in built-up urban areas where land is scarce and expensive. Boston's "Big Dig" has cost more than \$300 million per lane mile, and figures of \$100 million or more are common. Another example: O'Toole says that "Denver's light-rail line is the most dangerous transit route in the nation, killing more than 38 people per billion passenger miles."

The Center for Transportation Excellence replies,

Denver's light rail system opened in 1994 and has not yet carried a billion passenger miles. Further, since its inception, there have been only 6 fatalities. Of these, three of the fatalities were pedestrians . . . one was a passenger in a car that illegally went around a crossing border; and the other two were ruled suicides.

There have been no fatalities on board any of Denver's light rail trains.

Finally, there is the "BS Factor." As in the other studies by the anti-transit troubadours, it's high. On its first page, the Abstract, "Great Rail Disasters" proclaims, "rail transit has negative net impacts on every urban area in which it is located." Really? In New York City? Care to try to run that city without its subways? Or Chicago without Metra and CTA? Or L.A. without the Blue Line? Come on, Randy, do you really expect anyone to take crap like that seriously?

Of course, troubadours don't expect to be taken seriously. They only expect to be well rewarded, for sad laments about worlds that never were and never will be.

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