

Wendell Cox vs. Texas Transportation Institute

This is a response to the recent publication by Wendell Cox and Randall O'Toole "The Contribution of Highways and Transit to Congestion Relief: A Realistic View", which questions the validity of the Texas Transportation Institute's 2003 Annual Urban Mobility Study. It appears that the authors have made analytical errors regarding demographics and agency spending for public transportation. Furthermore, he uses those conclusions to make faulty policy recommendations in terms of highway expansion and privatization.

BACKGROUND

Texas A&M University houses the Texas Transportation Institute (TTI), is the nation's largest university-affiliated transportation research agency in the nation. For over 20 years, TTI has produced the Annual Urban Mobility Study, an indicator on how well our nation's transportation infrastructure is performing.

In his report, the author claims that the TTI study should not be relied upon because it (1) exaggerates the effect of transit on congestion, (2) erroneously indicates that transit has increased its share of urban travel, (3) focuses on non highway travel options, and (4) was unduly influenced by the transit industry.

However, the arguments Mr. Cox uses to back up these claims are incomplete at best and inaccurate at worst. Following is an analysis of the evidence offered in this piece, specifically in terms of (1) demographic inaccuracies, (2) the notion of the private sector as "savior", (3) spending on transportation, (4) automobile convenience, (5) highway improvements, and (6) guilt by association with the transit industry.

DEMOGRAPHIC INACCURACIES

Cox's assumptions about the demographics of transit riders are used to make inaccurate conclusions. He states that "two-thirds of transit riders use transit precisely because they are unable to drive because of age, income, or disabilities." Actually, only 17 percent of transit passengers are below 18 or over 65 years old and only 1 percent have disabilities.¹

It is unclear how Cox arrives at his conclusion that household income is a determinant of transit use. Still, if we assume that Cox is referring to the family income bracket of under \$15,000, a designation outlined in the Public Transportation Fact Book which 28% of transit riders fall under², the combined total is still well under 50%, much less than the author's 66%. Furthermore, there is an overlap of between being over 65 and having a family income under \$15,000, so one wouldn't add these figures straight to get a total, as they do.

¹ American Public Transportation Association, 2003 Public Transportation Fact Book

² Ibid

PRIVATE SECTOR AS 'SAVIOR'

Additionally, Cox and his libertarian co-author, Randall O'Toole, seem to believe that "if the public [transit] system were to disappear tomorrow, the private sector would quickly move in to satisfy the demand." First, there is no precedent to this claim, and second, where private companies have been given authority, the market has not provided them an opportunity to capitalize.³

SPENDING ON TRANSPORTATION

Cox attempts to shock the reader when he states that "many urban areas have written plans that spend well over half of their transportation budgets on transit systems." Citing spending levels for Atlanta's metropolitan planning organization, Cox prefers to use just one governmental entity's expenditures over a short period of time for his analysis. A more accurate picture would include averaging multiple government entity actual expenditures over a longer period of time. This would show that transit actually consumes about 10-20% of total government transportation expenditures within a region, a claim that numerous studies support⁴. For example, in the Puget Sound region of Washington state, less than 3% of the region's direct public and private transportation expenditures go toward transit, ferries, and nonmotorized transportation⁵.

AUTOMOBILE CONVENIENCE

Further in his analysis, Cox uses average speeds of each mode to conclude that autos are faster and more convenient than using transit. This conclusion is inaccurate for two reasons. While average speeds for autos, meaning throughout a 24 hour period, may prove faster than rail transit, it says nothing about the speed during peak hour commutes, the time at which congestion is highest, and the same period of time that over half of all transit passengers use transit. In a national survey that asked people why they used transit, 43% said that it's faster than using an automobile⁶. Furthermore, average speeds for modes say nothing about total commute time and cost (finding available parking, cost of parking, transfers, walking, etc), and should not be used as a determinant of mode superiority.

HIGHWAY IMPROVEMENTS NOT THE PANACEA

³ Carquinez Associates, www.carquinezassociates.com/ptlibrary/OTOole43.htm

⁴ Transit Alliance, www.transitalliance.org/response_to_critics.htm

Congressional Budget Office, www.cbo.gov/showdoc.cfm?index=1256&sequence=1

Bureau of Transportation Statistics,

www.bts.gov/publications/government_transportation_financial_statistics/tables/table_1a.html

⁵ Puget Sound Regional Council, www.psrc.org/datapubs/pubs/costs.pdf

⁶ Public Transit In America: Findings from the 1995 Nationwide Personal Transportation Survey, Center for Urban Transportation Research, Tampa, FL, September, 1998, pp. 4-2 and 4-3

Later in Cox's report, it becomes clear what his policy recommendations are: High Occupancy Toll (HOT) lanes and Intelligent Highway Systems – both auto-based solutions. While there remains a need for auto-based infrastructure improvements, Cox drastically oversells the viability and cost-effectiveness of such solutions. One need only look at Orlando's recent election results regarding HOT lanes or California's Highway 91 toll lane failure to see the political reluctance of such a strategy. The cost of adding an urban freeway lane, which HOT lanes would require, far exceeds the \$10 million per mile Cox claims. Just look at Boston's Big Dig, which came in \$10 billion over budget, and cost nearly \$300 million per lane mile. While the Big Dig is an extreme example, a recent report from the General Accounting Office shows the vulnerability of cost overruns by numerous road projects and public infrastructure projects in general. The report found that on 23 of 30 major projects there were cost increases ranging from 2% to 211%.⁷

GUILT BY ASSOCIATION

Cox clearly has concerns with this year's congestion study because of a perceived "transfer of sponsorship" to the American Public Transportation Association. First, it should be noted that there was no transfer of sponsorship, and that APTA provided additional sponsorship, above and beyond the traditional sponsors of the report, namely state DOTs. It should also be noted that the American Road and Transportation Builders Association was also brought on board as an additional sponsor. Secondly, APTA's sponsorship was sought after because of rising doubts on the "validity of the data in accurately measuring congestion and accounting for investments to combat it."⁸ This year, the TTI report not only models the effectiveness of transit, but also the effectiveness of HOV lanes, ramp metering, incident management, and signal coordination. This report can hardly be claimed as slanted towards the public transportation industry, as Cox claims.

In conclusion, strong improvements have been made to the annual TTI report to account for congestion relief strategies. This has only added to its validity as an indicator of real congestion in our communities. Furthermore, the study supports the claim that public transportation has indeed helped to reduce our urban congestion problems.

⁷ Victoria Transport Policy Institute, Great Rail Disaster Critique, March, 2004.

⁸ Surface Transportation Policy Project, www.transact.org/news.asp?id=10