

TRANSIT IN AMERICA

MOBILITY or MADNESS?

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15820 Clayton Road, St. Louis, MO 63011,
Telephone: 636-386-1789, Fax: 314-878-6294

REALITY AND GOVERNMENT ... A DISCONNECT?

Few Americans are in favor of government expenditures that will raise taxes. As the small business owner, the homeowner and families cut back on things they would like to do and worry about their future, government seems to be the only sector that is still growing in size and cost. Is there a disconnect between reality and government?

The St. Louis area is facing a proposed one-half cent sales tax increase on April 6, 2010, to support METRO, the agency that runs Metrolink light rail and buses. Meanwhile, all of the United States is facing the reauthorization of the highway-funding bill later this year. Hearings have already been held in Washington, D.C., and progressive ideas are being put into place by the transportation and housing departments with the support of Congressional committees. Unless America is glued to CSPAN watching the hearings, the transformations planned will happen without our knowledge.

Recently *FRONT LINE* had an opportunity to talk with one of the nation's experts on transportation, **Randal O'Toole**. His new book is *Gridlock, Why we're stuck in traffic and what to do about it*. Following is a part of this exclusive interview, and the subsequent discussion describes how the ability of the American citizen to move about freely is in jeopardy, because of what is occurring at the federal level.

FRONT LINE (FL): Randal, you use the word *mobility* to describe a person going from point 'A' to point 'B' for whatever purpose—to get to work or to get the groceries. How has mobility changed down through history?

RANDAL O'TOOLE (RO): During the nineteenth century we saw the transportation revolution of steamboats, steam passenger trains, freight trains, streetcars, and bicycles, and so on. And yet, I was surprised to find that in 1910 most Americans really had no more mobility than they had in 1810 or 1710.



**MetroLink traveling over historic Eads Bridge,
St. Louis, Missouri**

And that's because passenger trains were too expensive for most people to ride, streetcars were only for urbanites, and really only for middle class urbanites (working class people walked to work), and most Americans in 1910 lived in rural areas anyway, so they didn't have any streetcars. So, in 1910 the average American probably traveled as far as they could get on foot and that was about it, and on horseback to some degree, but again only the wealthy and farmers had horses.

What happened after 1910 was that Henry Ford developed the mass-produced automobile. He doubled worker pay, cut the price of cars in half, and suddenly factory workers could afford cars. Personal mobility just zoomed upwards from perhaps 2,000 miles per person per year to almost 20,000 per person per year today.

FL: Before 1910 you were really limited by how far you walked, or if you had a horse, you could ride a horse. What are the benefits of mobility?

RO: One important benefit is, if you can reach all the jobs that are within twenty minutes of driving, you can get *far more jobs* than the jobs you can reach within twenty minutes of riding a streetcar, twenty minutes of bicycling or twenty minutes of walking. Most people

seem to want to commute about twenty minutes to work. So, increasing travel speeds significantly increases the jobs that are available, which in turn increases worker productivity, because employers have access to a more highly skilled workforce.

FL: In your book, *Gridlock*, you discuss that California found that doubling the distance that workers could commute to work increased their productivity by 25 percent. That's huge!

RO: Yes, and we've seen personal incomes increase by seven times since 1910. I estimate that half of that is due to the mobility provided by the automobile ... that is a huge increase in incomes that we never saw before. If you go back in history before that, you don't see that kind of an increase in incomes in a single century.

FL: What are other benefits of mobility?

RO: We have access to lower cost consumer goods; our incomes are going up and consumer costs are going down. We have better housing. Home ownership increased by 50 percent because working class people could own their own homes instead of renting apartments like they did before. Starting in the early nineteenth century, we saw the rise of factories in industrial America. Most of the people who worked in those factories had to live within walking distance, because they didn't have or they couldn't afford horses, and they couldn't afford to ride streetcars when they

became available. Only the middle class, which meant the office workers in those factories, were able to draw enough salary that they could ride a streetcar. This meant that only the middle class could afford to buy a house within walking distance. Land was just too expensive; there are

too many people who had to live within a walking distance for everybody to be able to afford a house.

FL: If the automobile gave the opportunity for more people to have access to jobs, a single-family house and a backyard, how did this change the middle class?

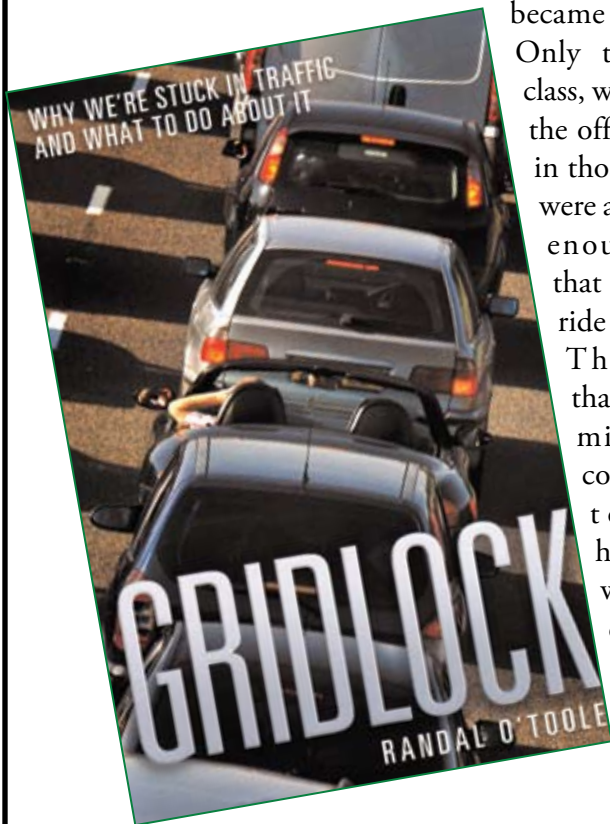
RO: Today what we call the middle class is blurred. At one time *middle class* referred to white-collar workers. *Lower middle class* or *working class* referred to blue-collar workers. Today white-collar workers and blue-collar workers have similar incomes; and have similar homes; they live in similar suburbs, and they drive similar cars. We generally call them all middle class, but in fact their tastes are different, and the work they do is different. There are some differences, but because of the automobile they all have access to the same stores, the same consumer goods. The automobile has been really valuable for working class families.

FL: Are you saying that physical mobility has increased the social or class mobility by making the better life accessible to a lot more people, because they have **automobiles and roads**?

RO: Yes, and it's a strange thing, but I think that one of the reasons why there is all this debate over sprawl is because the automobile made suburban homes accessible to working class families. When wealthy families moved to the suburbs, nobody complained. When white-collar workers moved to the suburbs nobody complained about sprawl. It was only when blue-collar workers started moving to the suburbs that an issue arose. They have different tastes, different tastes in music, different tastes in foods. Working class people drink beer, white-collar workers drink wine. You had some class conflicts there. I think a lot of the sprawl debate originated with people saying, "I want the working class confined to the cities so that I can enjoy suburbs with people like me and not be bothered by them."

FL: Randal, in your book, *Gridlock*, you talk about future mobility and the problems that we're going to be facing. What are the problems ahead for us?

RO: The big problem is political. We've had this huge anti-automobile, anti-sprawl movement for the past several decades, and it has just been building up. The Obama administration has bought into it. We now have a Secretary of Transportation who says it's his job to coerce people out of their cars. [Secretary Ray LaHood said, "I haven't really thought creatively



about what we should do about transit, but transit is really coming into its own, and people are really after these transit funds that we have in the recovery plan because they see that as a way to get people out of their automobiles, onto buses, onto light rail, and it's a way to really move people around these congested communities.”^{1]}



increase, it will get people out of their automobiles and onto transit.” “Congestion signals positive urban benefits.” “Positive urban development,” says one urban plan. We see it by their actual practice. They take city streets that have four lanes of traffic and take one or two lanes out; turning them into two lane

streets or two lane streets with a center left turn lane. They take city streets that are two lanes, but still provide reasonable traffic flows, and disrupt those traffic flows by putting bumps in the streets or by disrupting traffic signals. You used to be able to drive through cities and see signs saying, “Traffic signals set for thirty miles an hour.” I’ve recently seen signs that say, “Traffic signals set to require frequent stops.” They deliberately uncoordinated the traffic signals, so that you can’t drive from one end of town to another without encountering a red light every other block.

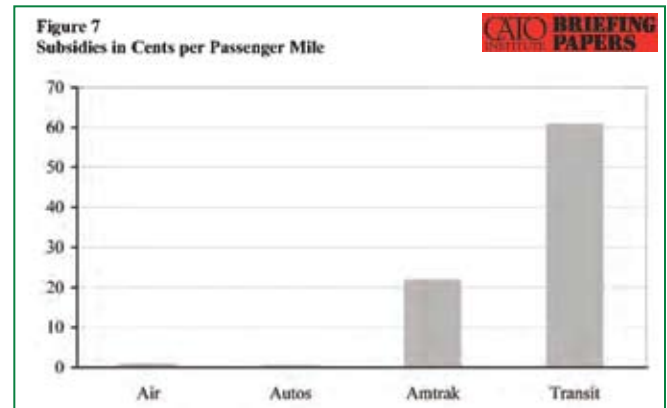
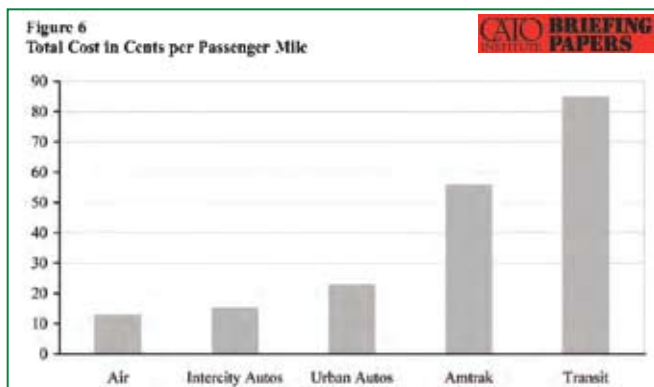
The chairman of the House Transportation Committee says that he wants to mandate land use planning throughout the United States to try to force people to live in higher density metropolitan areas and prevent people from moving to distant suburbs or to rural areas because they “shouldn’t be allowed to do that.” We have this movement that has gained so much traction. One of their solutions to try to discourage people from driving is to increase traffic congestion. We’ve seen traffic congestion increase five times in the last twenty-five years. A significant portion of that is because many urban planners believe congestion is a good thing, so they’re not doing anything to relieve congestion. They are spending money on streetcars that do nothing about congestion, except make it worse, rather than spending money on things that actually can relieve congestion.

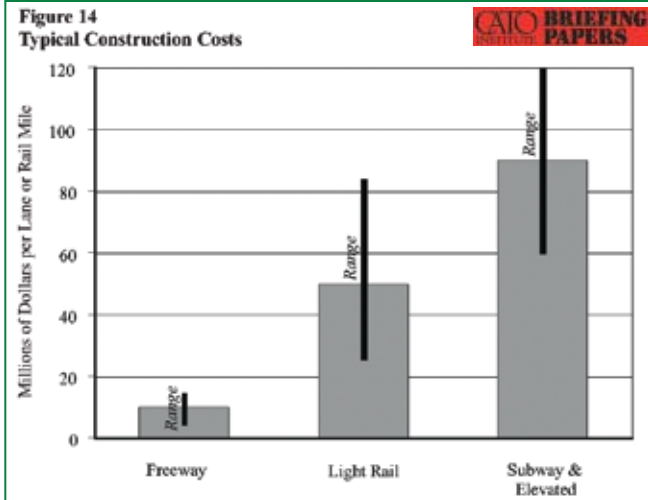
FL: Randal, you were saying that there seems to be an effort to allow or even promote congestion by those who are planning our highways and our byways. Why do you say that you think that they are doing this deliberately?

RO: They say they are doing it deliberately, often right in their plans. We hear them say things like, “Congestion is our friend. If we allow congestion to

FL: There is a push around the country to put in light rail systems. We are being told that this is the answer to everything. At the same time, these transit companies usually have a bus system that has been deteriorating, and they have cut the bus schedules. What about light rail?

RO: In the last thirty years, we have spent about \$100 billion dollars building new rail transit lines. The best of them would be regarded as failures, and the worst of them are just spectacular disasters. The cost of building the rail transit is so high that they have made huge cuts to bus service and have lost transit riders. In other cases, you have rapidly growing transit ridership with buses, then they start building the rail lines. The growth rate just collapses, because again, it’s so expensive. Yet there is this feeling that we ought to





replace buses with trains, buses with streetcars. It's absurd. Buses are so much cheaper. They are so much more cost effective. You can spend \$500 million dollars building a light rail line and accomplish exactly the same thing with \$10 million dollars worth of buses. It is so much cheaper, and the operating costs are really lower as well in most cases.

Transit agencies that build rail turn into *land use czars*. They demand that people change their land use patterns to suit the rail lines. They demand that high-density housing be built along the rail line. They demand that jobs move in along rail line. They demand that housing and jobs have limited parking so people won't drive from home or to their jobs. They make all these demands and require strict zoning. They subsidize it because people don't want to live in places like that. Then they claim it's a great success. When you get 50 percent occupancy of a place that is heavily subsidized, and it's on a light rail line, they say, "Oh, this is a great success!"

FL: Is it true that your favorite mode of transportation is train and bicycle and that you even owned five passenger rail cars and worked on restoring a steam locomotive? You don't seem to be hostile to rail at all.

RO: That's right. In fact I went on a nice train ride yesterday. But just because I like trains doesn't mean I think that taxpayers should subsidize my hobby or my personal choice. Some people might like dirigibles. Some people might like helicopters. Just because somebody likes them doesn't mean that taxpayers should have to subsidize everybody's favorite form of travel. We should use forms of travel that make economic sense. The fact is that driving and highways get a little bit of subsidy but we get tremendous amounts of travel from those highways and the

subsidies average less than a penny per passenger mile. Subsidies to air travel average a penny per passenger mile. Subsidies to Amtrak increase and are more than twenty-five cents per passenger mile. Amazingly, subsidies to urban transit are more than sixty cents per passenger mile, with rail transit in many cases being much, much more than that.

FL: Is it true that the percentage of people that actually use the light rail transit in cities is only four or five percent of the population of that area?

RO: In terms of percentage of travel, it's much smaller than that. In most places it is less than one percent.

FL: So we're paying huge taxes so that that one to four percent (1-4%) of the people can ride light rail?

RO: That's right. For example, in the San Francisco Bay area, they are spending 70 percent to 80 percent of all their transportation dollars on urban transit, and it carries only four percent of all travel. Half of that is rail and half of that is bus.



FL: What about the federal gasoline taxes that were to pay for the roads and the bridges?

RO: Actually the states started the highway tax. My home state of Oregon was the first to pass a gas tax in 1919, and they dedicated it to highways. It was a user fee. Every other state followed. By 1930, all forty-eight states had a gas tax and dedicated 100 percent of that gas tax to highways. In 1956, Congress dedicated federal gas taxes to highways, in particular the interstate highway system. It wasn't until 1982 that Congress began diverting some of those gas taxes to transit. Today 20 percent to 30 percent of the gas taxes you pay to the federal government go to transit and other non-highway activities.

FL: Isn't it actually less than 50 percent of the federal gasoline tax that is mandated to the highways to take care of the roads?

RO: That's right. The House Transportation Committee has proposed a new bill that would dedicate only 20 percent of your gas taxes to highways. The rest of it will either go to transit or would be up for grabs.

FL: Randal, you have a section in your book called, *Lies My Transit Agency Told Me*. What things are not true?

RO: They often say that you need to build trains because a rail line can carry more people than a ten-lane freeway or an eight-lane freeway. In fact, there is only one rail line in the country that carries more people

than a two-lane freeway, and that's the New York City subway. Other than that, there is no rail transit line that carries more than a one-lane freeway. Yet, those rail lines cost as much as a six- to eight-lane freeway per mile. [The expense is there and the utility is not.]

FL: Proponents of the light rail tell us that the poor need it to get to their jobs. What about that?

RO: They're building their trains because they say middle class people won't ride the bus, so we have to build expensive trains for these snobs to get them out of their cars. The truth is if you want to take people who don't have cars to work, you provide buses. They are cheap and efficient, and they can be just as comfortable, just as attractive as trains. They can go just as fast. They can operate just as frequently. But that's not what the bus lines usually do. They usually operate the buses really infrequently in low-income neighborhoods, and then they build trains into high-income neighborhoods and run them every seven minutes.

----- End of interview-----

Mr. O'Toole recommends in his book "flexible-capacity transit: transit capable of moving large numbers of people where needed but economically moving small numbers where demand is lower, such as in suburban areas. Rail transit, with its very high fixed costs, cannot qualify ... Buses can provide true flexible-capacity transit."

FEDERAL PLANS FOR YOU!

In early summer of 2009, James Oberstar, chairman of the U.S. House Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure, announced a radical, progressive plan to federalize not only transportation decisions but also, ultimately, housing choices. The introduction of *The Surface Transportation "Authorization" Act of 2009* (not "reauthorization") [STAA] indicates a desire for the new bill to not simply continue past highway-related programs but to reinvent and re-focus the federal approach to surface transportation and housing choices.

Oberstar's *Blueprint for Investment and Reform* (Page 38, June 18, 2009) says,

"While car travel will continue as the core of our surface transportation system, our network must give travelers options that go beyond the automobile. Public transit, walking, and bicycling take cars off the road, reduce congestion, lower our dependence on foreign oil, and lessen our greenhouse gas emissions. A system that provides modal choice provides benefits for all users."

Barbara McCann, executive director of the National Complete Streets Coalition, commented on the Oberstar proposal on June 18, 2009, saying, "The House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee has

provided the first look at what their version of the next federal transportation authorization might look like, and **complete streets** gets prominent placement. Chairman James Oberstar and Ranking Member John Mica released a lengthy 'blueprint' for the soon-to-be-introduced bill. It calls for "comprehensive street design policies and principles," and the Executive Summary makes clear that this is indeed complete streets."³ (Emphasis added.) The proposal says,

"To ensure that roadways are built with the needs of all users in mind, the Surface Transportation Authorization Act requires that States and metropolitan regions consider comprehensive street design principles. Comprehensive street design takes into account the needs of all users, including motorists, motorcyclists, transit riders, cyclists, pedestrians, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities ..."⁴

The Coalition of Complete Streets believes that to "create livable communities" streets need to be for everyone. Their complaint? "[T]oo many streets are designed only for speeding cars, or worse, creeping traffic jams. They are unsafe for people on foot or bike – and unpleasant for everybody."⁵

In a radical change from the past, the House proposal is a transportation policy, not just a bill. Dr. Ron Utt of the Heritage Foundation writes:

"The Surface Transportation Authorization Act as currently written would dramatically change federal transportation policy. It would shift transportation funding from cars to mass transit

and centralize decision-making in Washington, D.C., at the expense of state and local government authority. Funding and running the many new transportation programs would require massive tax increases and substantial increases in the number of federal, state, and local government employees. Finally, STAA could undermine the basic property rights of Americans."⁶

An amazing section is included in the proposal that ties transportation to land use and housing. Dr. Utt notes,

"New Office of Livability. Section 1203 of the bill establishes a new Office of Livability. The first several pages of this section justify the new office's creation and provide a rationale for its subsequent efforts to discourage automobile use in favor of 'sustainable modes of transportation,' 'land use and planning decisions [that] must include consideration about transportation options,' and 'alternative modes of transportation to complement personal vehicle travel, including public transit, walking and bicycling.' It argues that '[o]ver reliance on automobiles can have adverse impacts on public health, both through lessened physical activity and from increased pollutants," and that "[i]ncreasing the availability and use of sustainable modes of transportation and the development of livable communities are national priorities.' It should be noted that the term 'sustainable' pervades STAA, and a new Section 331(q) (7) defines sustainability simply as 'public transit, walking and bicycling.' "

Dr. Utt continues,

"In fairness, the goals of Chairman Oberstar's Office of Livability are less extreme than the 'livability' criteria established by Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood. In recent months, LaHood has announced his intention to 'coerce' Americans out of their cars and has defined 'livability' as 'being able to take your kids to school, go to work, see a doctor, drop by the grocery or post office, go out to dinner and a movie, and play with your kids in the park, all without having to get into your car.'

"Section 1508 adds more requirements to MPO [Metropolitan planning organizations] operations and goals, including minimum requirements that 'include efforts to increase public transportation ridership ... walking, bicycling, and other forms of nonmotorized transportation.' "





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The section also requires large area MPOs to include new provisions in their long-range transportation plans:

- (i) Land use patterns that support improved mobility and reduced dependency on single-occupant motor vehicle trips.
- (ii) An adequate supply of housing for all income levels.
- (iii) Limited impacts on valuable farmland.
- (iv) A reduction in greenhouse gas emissions.
- (v) An increase in water and energy conservation and efficiency.
- (vi) An improvement in the livability of communities.”

As of March 2010, Congress was looking at reauthorizing the highway transportation bill, H.R. 3617, the Surface Transportation Extension Act of 2009. It would “provide an extension of Federal-aid highway, highway safety, motor carrier safety, transit, and other programs funded out of the Highway Trust Fund pending enactment of a multiyear law reauthorizing such programs.” As of now, the bullet has been avoided, but Oberstar’s proposal, which includes Obama’s high-speed rail proposal, awaits.

The questions Americans need to ask again revolves around the purpose of government.

Is it to take care of the citizen?

Is it mandating how a citizen moves about?

Is it deciding for him what kind of home he lives in?

Is it taking away the citizen’s choice as to how close to his job he wants to live?

How America answers these questions will determine whether Americans will retain their freedom of mobility.

Endnotes

¹ Hearing of the Transportation, Housing and Urban Development ..., Washington, D.C., March 19, 2009, page 8 of transcript, <http://www.votesmart.org/speech>.

² O’Toole, Randal, *Gridlock: Why we’re stuck in traffic and what to do about it*, CATO Institute, Washington, D.C., 2009.

³ www.completestreets.org/policy/federal/house-authorization-blueprint-includes-complete-streets/.

⁴ House Committee of Transportation and Infrastructure, *The Surface Transportation Authorization Act of 2009*, June 18, 2009, p. 8.

⁵ www.completestreets.org/complete-streets-fundamentals/factsheets/livable-communities/.

⁶ Utt, Dr. Ron, “Chairman Oberstar’s Transportation Plan: A Costly Exercise in Social Engineering,” Heritage Foundation, *Backgrounder* #2348, Washington, D.C., December 10, 2009.

Charts in this article are from the Cato Institute’s *Briefing Papers*, #116, *The Citizen’s Guide to Transportation Reauthorization*, by Randal O’Toole, December 10, 2009.