

from
Upholding the Law
and Other Observations

by
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Hold That Bus!



As the primary season of another election year descends upon the nation, accompanied by the usual plagues of campaign signs and junk mail, voters in many urbanized areas are also facing the perennial eruption of tax-funded boondoggles marring their ballots. These proposals are all touted as either the magic charm that will reverse the decline of the central mega-city, such as casinos or a new sports arena, or the provision of a desperately needed personal service that somehow the market is disinclined or unable to address, such as mass transit or the maintenance of cultural centers.

Southeastern Michigan, where my family makes its home, is one such area currently bedeviled by boosters of a mass-transit plan. Interestingly, the notion, which requires state legislative action in order to proceed, is complicated at that level by efforts to include language in the enabling legislation allowing any given county to opt out of the plan-- an accurate reflection of the sensible disinterest that this plan enjoys among those who would pay for it.

Indeed, the results of a recent University of Michigan survey on attitudes towards mass transit in southeastern

Michigan, published on March 20th, 2002, reveal that most of the area's residents realize what never-say-die boosters of tax funded transportation schemes simply won't face-- that the central mega-city, which is the only organizational form for which mass transit truly makes sense, is a thing of the past,... and good riddance. While at one time the economic and technological limits on personal transportation made giant, dense-packed concrete jungles infested with corrupt political machines, crime, and limited horizons virtually unavoidable, those limits have been overcome and the cities are being abandoned as fast as possible. The University found that 68% of respondents to its poll had no interest in funding any mass transit, that 70% had no interest in living in a community designed around a mass transit system, and indeed, only 5% of area residents ever made any use of the mass transit options (regional bus system; People Mover elevated rail) already in place.

All over the United States cities are shrinking and suburban and rural areas are growing as people escape the pathologies of urban living. According to U.S. government figures, while in 1960 the number of people living in cities and suburbs was the same, as of 2 years ago there were 1.65 times as many suburbanites as city dwellers. And this trend cuts across demographic lines as well; by the year 2000 fully 39% of all black households in the United States were suburban.

Despite this reality, those clinging to power-bases in existing central cities still for a constant stream of silver bullet solutions that will 'turn the city around', as if spending enough of other people's money will repeal the laws of nature. Actually, the laws under assault are the laws of economics, which the political hack class learned long ago can be, if not repealed, at least usefully distorted. They know that once enough money has been spent on some dumb project, or series of projects, it

becomes increasingly easy to talk voters out of walking away from the "investment".

Furthermore, as the trough begins to fill a cadre of very interested beneficiaries willing and able to chunk out campaign money and become politically active in defense of that pork springs up like toadstools in a swamp after the rain. The mass-transit scheme being pushed for metro Detroit, involving a radical upgrading and expansion of the existing unused bus system and the eventual addition of various light rail routes into the central city, is no exception. It's a dumb idea by which a tiny market will be poorly served, and which will cost a fortune. Just the bus system upgrade alone is estimated (by its supporters) to soak up 2 billion "investment" dollars over the next 25 years (\$80 million per year), in addition to a perpetual \$200 million each and every year in operating expenses. Then light rail gets piled on top.

The need for a \$200 million annual operating subsidy reveals the truth about the market for the bus system-- there isn't one. The fact that terminals built for mass-transit light rail schemes are typically equipped with every parking space the planners can scrape up reveals the truth about the light rail concept: people *drive* to the mass-transit terminals, and then only if they can't drive to where they really want to go. For most people and in most cases mass-transit will never be any more than a slow and inconvenient fallback should the road and parking infrastructure serving their desired destination become-- forgive me-- 'overtaxed'.

In fact, boosters of such schemes rely on the paucity and condition of parking options in the central cities to help make their publicly funded private cash cow attractive, or at least less smelly, without giving a moment's thought to simply spending a tenth as much money on adding safe, convenient parking downtown, which would completely satisfy the ever-diminishing demand for travel into that destination-- and with little, if any, ongoing public expense. The interests of those

traveling out of the city are ill-served by mass-transit as well-- because once you get out here in the suburbs, you'd better have a car!

Of course, the plan is that such outbound riders will use the bus system once they get into the suburbs. But if they're coming out to work or shop, they can afford to pay for transportation. If it's just sightseeing, I have a problem with spending a combined \$280 million a year plus the unknown costs of the light rail system in order to subsidize tourism by 5% or less of the area population. Frankly, the \$280 million could buy 28 million \$10 cab rides each year. If there is a real need for welfare in transportation, let's just hand out taxi vouchers.

Rather than spend time and resources on dinosaur concepts like mass-transit, regional planners should focus on the encouragement of telecommuting and the elimination of licensure barriers to a brisk free market in taxi, jitney, and microbus service-- transit options suited to the sprawling, decentralized living arrangements that most tax-payers and voters prefer. In addition to being incomparably more flexible in performance, vastly more resource-efficient and infinitely more adaptable to actual demand than any mass transit option, such market-based approaches enjoy the additional cachet of being in tune with the times. Though I'm reluctant to flog even a quiver out of the wildly over-exercised 9-11 horse, I can't resist pointing out that, within the context of that particular crisis-of-the-hour, the notion of spending money on packing large numbers of citizens into buses or rail cars is almost ludicrously counter-intuitive.

If all goes well, a time will come when our grandchildren will take their kids on wide-eyed tours of the empty canyons, abandoned buildings, and silent overgrown miles of tiny, crowded residential plots that the cities will have become, explaining with a forgivable touch of condescension

Upholding the Law

that this was the way people were forced to live before private, personal vehicles and effective telecommunications technology were fully developed. Then they'll all pile back into their car and drive home-- to the suburbs.