

# Rail Against the Machine

What's so conservative about federal highways?

By William S. Lind

CONSERVATIVES DO NOT LIKE public transportation—or so libertarians and Republican officeholders tell us. If that means we must spend hours stuck in congested traffic, so be it. Under no circumstances would conservatives ever ride public transit.

Except that we are riding it, in growing numbers. Studies of passengers on rail-transit systems across the country indicate many conservatives are on board. Chicago's excellent METRA commuter trains offer one example. A recent survey revealed that in the six-county area METRA serves, 11 percent of commuters with incomes of \$75,000 or more commuted by train. In Lake County, the mean earnings of rail commuters were more than \$76,000. (The figure for bus riders was less than \$14,000.) Not surprisingly, the area METRA serves regularly sends Republicans to Congress.

So why are conservatives using the public transportation we are told they oppose? Because being stuck in traffic isn't fun, even if you are driving a BMW. On a commuter train or Light Rail line, you whiz past all those cars going nowhere at 50 or 60 miles per hour—reading, working on your laptop, or relaxing, instead of staring at some other guy's bumper.

Still, libertarians shriek, "Subsidies!"—ignoring the fact that highways only cover 58 percent of their costs from user fees, including the gas tax. To understand how conservatives might approach transportation issues more thoughtfully, we need to differentiate.

All public transit is not created equal. You will find few people with alternatives sitting on buses crawling slowly down city streets. Most bus passengers are "transit dependents"—people who have no other way to get around. But most conservatives have cars; they are "riders from choice," people who will only take transit that offers better conditions than driving. They demand high-quality transit, which usually means rail: commuter trains, subways, Light Rail, and streetcars.

Here we see one of the absurdities of the Republican position on transit. During the recent Bush administration, it was virtually impossible to get federal funding for rail-transit projects; buses were offered instead. But most Republicans' constituents are served by rail transit.

The perception that conservatives do not use public transportation is only one of the mistaken notions that has warped the Right's position on transportation policy. Another is that the dominance of automobiles and highways is a free-market outcome. Nothing could be further from the truth. Were we to drop back 100 years, we would find that Americans were highly mobile. Their mobility was based on a dense, nationwide network of rail transportation: intercity trains, streetcars, and interurbans (the latter two electrically powered). Almost all of these rail systems were privately owned, paid taxes, and were expected to make a profit. But they were wiped out by massive government subsidies

to highways. Today's situation, where "drive or die" is the reality for most Americans, is a product of almost a century of government intervention in the transportation market.

Another misperception is that public transportation does not serve conservative goals. Again, to understand the real situation we must differentiate between buses and trains. Buses do help the transit-dependent get to jobs, but for the most part, it is rail transit that serves conservatives' goals. Subways, Light Rail, and streetcars often bring massive economic development or redevelopment of previously run-down areas. Portland, Oregon built a new streetcar line, a loop of just 2.4 miles, for \$57 million. It quickly brought more than \$2 billion in new development. The small city of Kenosha, Wisconsin put in a streetcar line for just over \$4 million. It immediately brought \$150 million in development, with another \$150 million planned. Not surprisingly, both cities are expanding their streetcar systems. Buses have no such effect on development because a bus line can be here today, gone tomorrow. The investment in track and overhead wires streetcars and Light Rail require tells developers the service will be there for years to come.

Another conservative goal rail transit and intercity passenger trains advance is energy independence. One of America's greatest national-security weaknesses is our dependence on imported oil, most of it coming from

unstable parts of the world. One of the Bush administration's objectives in invading Iraq was to secure a major new source of oil; predictably, we got war but no oil. Electric cars may eventually become practical, but optimists have been disappointed before: Thomas Edison was certain that the necessary breakthrough in battery technology would occur in his lifetime. In the meantime, trains can be electrified, and even when diesel-powered they use fuel far more efficiently than do automobiles.

The list of reasons that the libertarian/Republican policy of opposing public transportation, especially rail, is wrong could run many pages. A more interesting question is what a thoughtful conservative position on transit might be.

Russell Kirk offers a starting point for crafting an answer. He said that the first conservative political virtue is prudence. And there is nothing prudent about leaving most people immobile should events beyond the pale cut off our oil supply, as happened in 1973 and

1979. At present, half of all Americans have no transit service, and of those who do, only half call it "satisfactory." The effects of suddenly stranding half the population are grim to imagine, not least on our already shaky economy. Grimmer still is the prospect of going to war to seize the missing oil. Prudence suggests the first goal of a conservative transportation policy would be to provide options, ways to get around without a car.

Conservatism offers a further guidepost: a predilection to turn to the past

## Tracking Costs

by Glen Bottoms

Rail transit's great enemy isn't public support or political will but its enormous price tag.

The expense of heavy-rail subway systems has limited recent growth to extensions of existing lines. The last heavy-rail construction completed in the U.S. was a 3.2 mile extension of Washington Metro's blue line to Largo Town Center, completed in 2004 at a cost of \$695 million (\$217 million/mile). Phase I of the Metro's 11.6 mile extension to Dulles Airport is estimated at a staggering \$2.65 billion (\$242.1 million/mile). The bite for New York City subway extensions is in another reality.

At first, Light Rail seemed to offer a solution, but its cost is steadily rising. The initial segment of Seattle's 15.6 mile Central Link Light Rail system, which opened in 2009, cost \$2.4 billion (\$154 million/mile). Portland, Oregon's proposed 7.3 mile MAX Light Rail extension to Milwaukie is estimated at \$1.4 billion (\$191.8 million/mile).

Now that streetcars have caught on in many U.S. cities—over 60 are currently planning streetcar projects—many fear that the cost-escalation virus could infect this mode as well. The price tag on Tucson's streetcar project, now under construction, has grown by 20 percent. Costs for proposed streetcar projects across the country range from a reasonable \$10 million to an eye-popping \$60 million per mile.

What accounts for this dramatic escalation? Three key factors: 1) overdesign, 2) lack of technical expertise at the overseeing transit agency, and 3) external factors like political interference and rising material costs.

Consultants retained to design these systems regularly

use plans that they already possess without regard to applicability or functionality, selecting higher-speed overhead wire in rail yards and city streets or specifying certain types of rail without regard for cheaper alternatives. Excessive tunneling is also a critical cost driver. Tucking Light Rail in subways to avoid disturbing traffic not only raises costs, it ignores the fact that dedicating lanes to cost-effective transit increases use. The technical knowledge to recognize these inappropriate designs is a critical element of cost control.

Supervisors often cite rising prices of construction components worldwide as the reason for transit projects' blown budgets. But this is not a major part of the story. Consider the case of Norfolk, Virginia's 7.4 mile Light Rail project, which suffered dramatic overruns as it was being built. One report indicated that 50 percent of the increase could be attributed to "soft" costs caused by poor management decisions, like the arrival of vehicles in a storage yard that hadn't been built yet.

America's rail infrastructure won't be resurrected overnight. But history shows that we can build rail economically and on time. After all, we have been constructing systems of all sizes and complexities in this country for well over a hundred years. Recalling those past experiences today will give us the tools we need to build the trains of tomorrow. ■

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for answers to today's problems. My old friend and colleague Paul Weyrich and I discovered that, as children in the 1950s, we shared a favorite television program: "I Remember Mama." Each show opened with a modern woman being baffled by a contemporary problem. Then, reverently, she would say, "I remember Mama ..." and the viewer would be transported to the 1890s, where Mama would demonstrate how an earlier generation had resolved the same difficulty. Conservatives like to remember Mama.

In transportation as in many things, the past was in some ways better than the present. Thanks to the Pullman Company, the night boats, our cities' excellent streetcar systems, and the fast, electric interurbans that connected cities with towns and the countryside, earlier generations weren't merely transported like so many barrels of flour. They traveled. Today, whether driving on the bland Interstate Highways or flying, Americans are just packaged and shipped.

So to Russell Kirk's prudence let us add a conservative motto: what worked then can work now. In practical terms, where do these twin starting points lead conservative transportation policy?

First, we need a National Defense Public Transportation Act. As late as the 1950s, it was still possible to travel from anywhere in America to pretty much anywhere else in the country on a network of buses and trains. But President Eisenhower's National Defense Interstate Highway Act, which has poured \$114 billion into highway construction, killed the privately operated passenger train. We're left with only a shadow of a wraith of its ghost in Amtrak's skeletal national system.

A National Defense Public Transportation Act would seek to recreate that lost network of trains and buses,

bit by bit as we can afford to do so. It would offer every county that choose to participate—conservatives believe in local options—a bus timed to connect its largest town with the nearest intercity passenger train. As time went on, it would thicken the network of trains so that a journey was made more by train and less by bus.

For cities, conservatives' banner should read, "Bring Back the Streetcars!" It is no coincidence that the decline of America's cities accelerated when streetcars were replaced by buses. People like riding streetcars, while few like riding buses. Streetcars are "pedestrian facilitators." It is easy to hop off, to shop and have lunch, then get on the streetcar again when feet get tired. Pedestrians are the lifeblood of cities; it is no accident that the first three chapters of Jane Jacobs's great book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* are about sidewalks.

Buses do have a role to play, mostly as feeders for rail lines. Express buses that run directly from outlying suburbs into city centers can also draw "riders from choice." These buses can be electrified with two overhead wires; unlike diesel buses, trolley buses neither smoke nor stink. San Francisco still has a nice network of them, thanks to all her steep inclines.

With streetcars should come two other revivals from the past: interurbans and night boats. Interurbans were big, fast streetcars—often very fast, running at 60 to 80 miles per hour in the open countryside. Interurbans connected big cities with outlying towns. Ohio alone had more than 2,000 miles of interurbans, all running on electricity. Today, just one remains, the South Shore between South Bend, Indiana and Chicago.

On the Great Lakes and major rivers, we also had night boats, wonderful steamers, often side-wheelers,

that connected cities like Cleveland with Buffalo and Detroit. Like night trains, they offer no-real-time travel. Board in the evening, enjoy a good dinner in the grand salon and a restful sleep in your cabin, and arrive at your destination at the beginning of the next business day.

One point conservatives should insist on in reviving our trains, streetcars, and interurbans is keeping costs down. The greatest threat to a revival of attractive public transportation is not the libertarian transit critics. It is an unnecessary escalation of construction costs, usually driven by consultants who know nothing of rail and traction history, are often in cahoots with the suppliers, and gold-plate everything. Overbuilding is omnipresent; some Light Rail lines (the current term for interurbans) look as if they were designed for the Shinkansen. We are now seeing construction cost figures for streetcar lines of \$40 million per mile and for light rail sometimes of more than \$100 million.

A simple management tool could quickly bring costs into line: "should cost" figures. These are standards based on experience; anything that exceeds them should require very detailed and highly convincing analyses. For streetcars, the "should cost" figure ought to be \$10 million per mile, and for light rail, \$20 million. Lines have been built for that, and less.

In our book, *Moving Minds: Conservatives and Public Transportation*, Paul Weyrich and I offer a chapter titled "Good Urban Transit: A Conservative Model." We illustrate a variety of ways to keep costs down, beyond "should cost": using existing rail infrastructure (the head of one transit system told me, "In my city, they wanted to spend \$1 billion to build an 18-mile Light Rail line parallel to an existing double-track railroad."), running streetcars on existing



Rapid Transit lines to access the suburbs, and perhaps most important, avoiding the foxfire allure of high technology.

All the technology needed to run electric railways, and run them fast, was in place 100 years ago. It was simple, rugged, dependable, and relatively cheap. In the 1930s, many of America's passenger trains, running behind steam locomotives, were faster than they are now. (After World War II, the federal government slapped speed limits on them.) There is no need for Maglev, monorails, or other innovations. All these do is drive up costs,

reduce reliability, and make the unhappy user dependent on proprietary technologies. Simplicity is a virtue when it comes to transportation policy.

That past/future transportation network of course includes automobiles. But Americans would no longer be dependent on cars. Our mobility wouldn't be held hostage by events overseas. Nor would we have to drive to leave the house, regardless of weather, old age, traffic congestion, or the myriad of other conditions that make automobiles less than convenient. We will still use cars to go to the

grocery store; no one wants to lug home ten bags of groceries on a streetcar. But for commuting to work, going downtown to a show or game, or traveling to see Grandma or on business, we would not be harnessed to the horseless carriage. America's motto would no longer be "drive or die." Many people, not just conservatives, might find that an attractive proposition. ■

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# Engine of Prosperity

How private development can fund public infrastructure

By Christopher B. Leinberger

REAL ESTATE HAS CAUSED two of the last three recessions. That is because real estate and the infrastructure that supports it—transportation, sewer, broadband, etc.—represent 35 percent of the asset base of the economy. When real estate crashes, the economy goes into a tailspin.

To speed up the recovery now slowly underway, the real estate sector must get back into the game. If over a third of our asset base is not engaged, the U.S. will be condemned to high unemployment and sluggish growth.

But the real estate recovery will not just be a continuation of the type of development of the past two generations—low density, drivable development. The Great Recession highlighted that there has been a structural shift in what the market wants. The bulk of the collapse in the housing market has been

on the metropolitan fringe, exactly where the focus of drivable suburban housing growth has been. Fringe housing in most metro areas has lost twice the value the metro area as a whole has shed from the mid-decade peak. But the value of the opposite type of housing, known as "walkable urban," where most daily needs can be met by walking or public transit, only experienced about half the decline from the housing peak.

In fact, some metro areas have seen the highest housing values per square foot shift from drivable suburban neighborhoods in 2000, like Great Falls in the Washington suburbs or Highland Ranch south of Denver, to walkable urban neighborhoods, like Dupont Circle in Washington or LODO in downtown Denver, in 2010. The lines crossed in the decade. The last time the lines crossed was in the 1960s, and they

were heading the opposite direction.

But housing may not play the same catalytic role during this recovery unless fundamental changes in transportation policy are adopted.

Most observers recognize that drivable suburban infrastructure has been massively subsidized. Some studies show that a drivable suburban home would have to pay 22 times what it currently pays for publicly and government-regulated private infrastructure. Suppose a city government, in its infinite wisdom, mandated that all restaurants must charge the same price for whatever customers ate or drank. That would mean patrons on a diet who do not drink alcohol would be massively subsidizing people who are stuffing themselves and getting drunk. This is not a free market at work.

This subsidized system has resulted

in an oversupply of the wrong kind of house in the wrong location for what the market now wants. Federal, state, and local governments subsidize this type of product by building roads to nowhere while existing roads are left to deteriorate. The American Association of Civil Engineers recently gave American roads a near failing D-grade. Meanwhile, the Federal Highway Trust Fund is bankrupt, getting continuous federal cash infusions to subsidize the system.

The market wants the walkable urban alternative, which explains the 40-200 percent per-square-foot price premiums this type of housing commands and the hue and cry (or shouts of joy) about gentrification in urban neighborhoods. What is missing is an adjustment to this new market reality by investing in infrastructure, particularly transportation infrastructure, which will spark the type of housing and development the market wants.

Why transportation infrastructure? Because transportation drives development. For the 6,000 years that we have been building cities, the transportation system a society chose dictated what real estate developers could build. Starting in Sumer (present-day Iraq) through Pompeii, from Pepys's London to Franklin's Philadelphia, and from Henry Ford's Detroit to the Beach Boys' Los Angeles, the transportation system is the rudder that steers the investment of a large portion of a society's wealth.

So how do we pay for the transit, especially rail transit, that will allow developers to give the market what it wants: walkable urban development? The answer can be found in the past. In the early 20th century, every American town over 5,000 people was served by a streetcar system—this at a time when the real per capita household income was one-third what it is today. By 1945, metropolitan Los Angeles had the longest passenger rail system in the

world. Atlanta's rail system was accessible to nearly all residents. Until 1950, our grandparents did not need cars to get around because they could rely upon various forms of rail transit. The average household only spent 5 percent of its income on transportation 100 years ago, versus 24 percent for drivable households today.

How did the country afford that extensive rail system? Real estate developers, sometimes aided by electric utili-

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ties, not only built the systems but paid rent to cities for right of way. Henry Huntington built the Pacific Electric in Los Angeles; Robert Lowry in Minneapolis built the Twin City Rapid Transit; and Sen. Francis Newlands in Washington built the Rock Creek Railway going up Connecticut Avenue from Dupont Circle in the 1890s. Newlands did not get into the rail transit business because of the profit potential of streetcars. He was a real estate developer, buying 1,700 acres between Dupont Circle and suburban Chevy Chase, Maryland, served by his streetcar line. The Rock Creek Railway did not make any money, but it was essential to getting homebuyers to Newlands's developments. So he subsidized the railway out of the profits. Most other streetcar/development entrepreneurs did the same thing. They understood that transportation drives development

and that development had to subsidize the transportation.

After World War II, the wealth of the country was so vast that the federal government, along with the states, disconnected transportation and development. We decided that “your tax dollars at work,” as every highway construction sign would proclaim, did not require a financial payback. One Polish refugee turned real estate developer, Nathan Shapell, who owned a large tract of land outside Los Angeles, was approached in the 1960s by the California highway department about building a freeway through his property. His first reaction was to offer for free as much land as needed for the road and to pay for the interchange to get customers to his land. The state official said that would not be necessary; the state would buy his land for the road and completely pay for the interchange. His reaction was, “What a wonderful country!”

But now, our transportation funding system is clearly broke. As transportation specialist Rob Puentes, senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, has said, “We’ve run out of money. It’s time to start thinking.”

It is time to go back to the future and redirect some of the property appreciation caused by rail transit to fund its expansion. This approach, called “value capture,” is best known in this country by its public version, tax-increment financing, which uses increased future tax revenues expected from an investment in public infrastructure to pay off the debt incurred to build it. It has been used extensively in Chicago by Mayor Daley to fund that city's remarkable turnaround.

At present, only a fraction of the value added to private property by public transportation is tapped to support infrastructure. Property taxes are around 1 percent per year in many parts of the country, so only 1 percent



of the upside can be captured. Yet the increase in private property values could yield much more, and there are many of methods by which support for transportation can be linked to rising land values. Property owners along a proposed rail corridor could vote in a special election, for example, to decide whether they want to fund the project.

In a Brookings Institution analysis of a proposed \$140 million streetcar line, just 17 percent of the increase in private property values would pay the effort's entire capital costs. This is what Senator Newlands found out over a century ago: development can help pay for transportation improvements. Using value capture to pay for rail transit and highways is charging those who benefit the most from these public investments, the property owners, for at least some of the cost of transportation improvements.

There is no reason all transportation project costs, not just those for rail,

should not be paid for in part by the property owners who profit from the improvement. If property owners would benefit from any transportation project, rail or road, and they are willing to help pay for it, that is the market speaking and we should listen—and benefit by their financial contribution. Levy exemptions could be made for existing communities that are too poor to pay if the project's main purpose is to provide existing residents transit to work, though even road or rail projects to parts of a metropolitan area that are underserved may spark economic growth that could then be used as value-capture revenue.

A few metro areas are experimenting with how these value-capture mechanisms would be structured. A developer, along with his adjacent property owners, funded a third of a new \$100 million Metrorail station in Washington, D.C. that serves their projects. He felt he got a 10-20 times return

on his investment by bringing rail transit to his front door. And it is important to note that this is only partially about the redevelopment of American cities. My research shows the majority of the market demand will probably be satisfied by transforming suburbs into walkable urban places.

Investment in rail transit is essential if we want to get the 35 percent of the economy in real estate growing more substantially. No economic recovery will be sustainable without the growth of the largest asset class in the economy. And looking to the past to understand how to pay for that rail transit is not only good policy, it is one of the only options we have left. ■

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# Urban Outfitters

Why should the Right give up on cities?

By John Norquist

WHY ARE SO MANY on the Right hostile to rail transit? When I was mayor of Milwaukee from 1988 to 2004, I wanted to restore some of the streetcar system that had been removed back in the fifties. Republicans, fueled by talk-radio personalities, attacked the idea as if I'd proposed Sovietizing the bratwurst industry. This attitude plays out across the United States, in any state that has a city big enough to have or desire a transit system.

Conservatives in Europe, Canada, and Japan aren't so resistant. In Switzerland, arguably Europe's most politically conservative nation, streetcars and commuter trains run almost everywhere people live. Is the reaction so different here because American conservatives oppose all government spending? No, the Republican Party, home to most conservatives in Congress, has supported comparatively large increases in spending when it has held power, most

recently under George W. Bush. But enthusiasm for spending on the Right seems to focus on war, highways, and prisons. Prisons and war I understand, as the modern Republican Party openly promotes itself as uniquely patriotic and aggressively devoted to law and order. But why support spending lots of tax money on highways?

The reasons are highly situational. Republican support tends to be strongest in middle- and outer-ring

suburbs developed in the second half of the 20th century when transportation and zoning standards yielded cul-de-sac subdivisions, malls, and business parks, all requiring cars to navigate. The Republican base spends a lot of time in automobiles, so their representatives feed them more and wider lanes of concrete. There are always other issues on which to take principled anti-spending stands, even as highway expansion projects soar in cost and leave regions just as congested as before.

Highway contractors are also an easy touch for campaign donations. As with military contractors, nearly all of their revenue is derived from government funds. As described by Robert Caro in *The Path to Power*, Lyndon Johnson learned this early in his political career, raising funds from Texas-based Brown and Root to help elect Democrats. It didn't take Republicans long to line up at the same counter. For the road-building industry, trading relatively small amounts of campaign cash

for billions in government contracts is an easy decision.

But this politically motivated interference has negative side effects. In Canada, where there is no national highway or transit program, cities and provinces fund their own mix of roads and transit. And all Canadian large cities have good transit and street networks. Conversely, in the U.S., declining core cities like Detroit and Buffalo have been covered with federally subsidized highways. Rather than profiting

## Bringing Back Downtown

by John Robert Smith

Last year, I left my hometown of Meridian, Mississippi and the house that my grandfather built to come to Washington, D.C. to work on the next federal transportation bill. Why? Because I believe the transportation investment decisions Congress makes today will determine our grandchildren's quality of life.

I am a lifelong advocate for passenger rail and a strong believer in people deserving choice in where they live and work and how they get there. But my 4-year-old grandson was the driving factor in this decision to move. He is the fifth generation of my family to live in that house. He is growing up in a town rich with history and tradition and a superb quality of life. But what will he see when he opens the front door in 15 years? Will the streets of America's small towns be choked with traffic and the sky tinged yellow with pollution? Worse, will the towns be abandoned because of lack of opportunity? Will he have just returned from serving his country protecting the oil reserves we desperately need to sustain a viable economy? Or will he step out the door and catch a streetcar that will take him to the train station that his grandfather built, where he will board Amtrak's higher-speed Crescent for a trip to the international airport in New Orleans for a journey overseas?

In smaller towns and rural areas across the U.S., reliable intercity rail systems provide an essential connection to the rest of America. For these towns, traffic congestion isn't the problem, the challenge is access to the mainstream American economy, as well as long commutes, volatile energy prices, and shifting demographics. People may not like to drive long distances for their jobs, health-

care, or education, but they often have no other choice.

I was mayor when we opened Meridian's Union Station 12 years ago to link interstate rail, bus, and city transit in a way that created a sense of place when visitors arrived in our downtown. The city invested \$1.3 million in that train station, leveraging an additional \$5.3 million investment, and then that station project leveraged another \$135 million in public and private investment in the downtown core, leading to the restoration of our historic downtown. Today, the train station annually hosts about 250 events and 300,000 visitors. Nearby is a new performing arts center, a restored Grand Opera house, a neighborhood with new retail and restaurants, and a mixed-income residential area, all of which have contributed to the revival of downtown Meridian.

The success of the train station and the downtown renaissance has made me a believer in the power of linking transportation to community revitalization. These transit-oriented development projects breathe new life into communities and they generate lasting public and private returns. They provide connectivity and livability, which is essentially quality of life—something everyone wants regardless of where they live, what they earn, or who they vote for.

Transportation touches every aspect of life in cities and towns of all sizes. People must have options. That is why I came to Washington. ■

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from the investment, Detroit is sinking and the greater region ranks as a leader in traffic congestion along with Atlanta, Houston, Los Angeles, and other areas with massive highway systems. Results like that shouldn't please a movement that insists on efficient use of government funds.

One oft-repeated critique of conservatives is that they are stuck in the past. When contemplating transportation policy, I wish that were true. After all, it was my fellow Democrats, with some unenthusiastic help from President Dwight Eisenhower, who performed the *coup de grace*, driving a dagger into the faltering private, but still tax-paying, passenger rail and streetcar transit industries. In 1956, the Interstate Highway Act, sponsored by Sen. Albert Gore Sr., passed through a Democratic Congress. Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson played a key role, pushing escalating subsidies for federal highways from a 40/60 fed/state match when he arrived in Washington to 90/10 in the interstate bill. Federal capital for trains and rail transit was zero. Railroads got the message and dumped passenger service; private transit companies shut down.

Meanwhile, the Right has become dysfunctionally attached to a transportation system that violates its principles. Highways appropriate private property. In greater Milwaukee, systemwide highway widening is on track to cost taxpayers nearly \$7 billion, while resulting in the seizing and demolition of nearly \$200 million worth of private property. Even where construction doesn't always require outright confiscation, wider highways drain the value from neighboring private property and have corrosive effects on compact central cities.

Before the recent push by the state to expand highways in Milwaukee, we took the opportunity to remove an aging elevated freeway that was causing

blocks and blocks of blight along riverfront land. Occupying property next to the freeway was like living next to the Berlin Wall. Removing the freeway has helped downtown grow as young people and retirees choose the convenience and excitement of urban living. Where before the freeway repelled high-

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**“Transportation infrastructure supported a fully functioning *civitas*—something the Right should care to conserve.”**

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value, jobs-producing uses, a new boulevard is home to a boutique hotel and serves as the gateway to the new headquarters of Fortune 500 Manpower Inc.

Throughout much of the history of human civilization, transportation infrastructure supported a fully functioning *civitas*—something the Right should care to conserve. Streets served three purposes: movement of goods and people, economic or market functions, and social functions. But for decades, federal policy has mandated that only movement be considered in allocating federal tax dollars. Streets that serve as a setting for people to walk, shop, and engage in civic life are not part of the Department of Transportation playbook. Instead, the federal and state DOTs push big grade-separated roads that focus only on vehicle throughput and not on markets that flourish on streets like Michigan Avenue in Chicago, Broadway in New York City, or Main Street in Hometown, America. The avenues and boulevards of our nation have not been a priority for federal funding even though they host much of America's social capital

and commerce.

Like urban boulevards, transit systems tend to fit comfortably in urbanized metropolitan areas. Thriving in tight spaces, transit systems involve far less seizing of property, and they attract development, boosting the value of neighboring property. Unlike highways, they generally function better as they attract more users. It's no surprise that cities with good transit have high concentrations of jobs and real estate value while places dominated by highways and without transit have faltered economically. Forcing road expansion on cities that don't want it while blocking investment in value-adding transit improvements seems imprudent and even punitive.

Throughout history, cities—created by market forces and the complex interactions of the people drawn to them—have been a setting for the growth of individual liberties, property rights chief among them. The city-states of Renaissance Italy and the North European Hanseatic League flourished as trade and private ownership expanded and declined only when large nation-states taxed them to wage wars. Today, conservatives still claim to value personal freedom and cherish markets, but they are alienated from the cities that nourish both. Instead, they are committed to a central state more interested in crusading abroad than building community at home.

The billions we devote to war would be better spent renewing America's own cities. Not blindly paving to satisfy federal mandates but prudently planning and efficiently constructing infrastructure to serve local needs. What could be more conservative than that? ■

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