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Happy Holidays! Spotlight on the Region will resume publication in the first week of 2005 after the New Year's celebration.

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The Forest for the Trees

If you're anything more than a casual reader of the region's daily newspapers, you probably know that spouses of former MTA board members receive free rides on the subway, and that Mayor Bloomberg is so angry with Madison Square Garden that he's boycotting Knicks games. What you may have missed, however, is any substantive discussion of the MTA's \$16 billion capital budget hole or the true implications of building a football stadium on the West Side of Manhattan.

As a reader of Spotlight on the Region, you've probably heard enough from us about the vital MTA capital plan and fatally flawed stadium proposal (if not, please see www.rpa.org). For the general public, though, there's not nearly enough information to understand or weigh in on these two crucial decisions. That's not to say that these issues are being ignored by the media. On the contrary, the MTA and the stadium seem to get more coverage than everything except Bernie Kerik's love life. It's the focus of the coverage that's troubling. A quick overview of some recent stories is telling.

On the MTA front, in the past week alone we've learned the following: MTA Chairman Peter Kalikow rarely rides the subway; former MTA board members and their spouses are entitled to free use of the transit system; MTA Executive Director Katherine Lapp received a 22 percent pay increase last year, so that she now makes almost as much as her peers in other cities; and the MTA paid its police officers \$15 million in overtime last year.

While each of these revelations may be relatively upsetting or informative, none make it any easier to understand the potential implications of an unfunded capital plan or how the gap could be filled. They are only distractions from the real issues, and allow the elected officials to sidestep the tough decisions that are needed to save the transit system.

Moving on to the stadium proposal, which faced its first and only public hearing Thursday, the past week revealed these juicy tidbits: season ticket holder Mayor Bloomberg has stopped attending Knicks games to protest Cablevision's opposition to the stadium proposal; the Mayor's tickets are not going to waste, however, as his daughters have been going to the games in his stead; the Mayor thinks Cablevision's anti-stadium ads are outrageous and misleading; Madison Square Garden gets \$1 million in free electricity each year, thanks to the taxpayers of New York; and the stadium is likely to be a major issue in the mayoral campaign.

Again, this is all interesting information, and some of it is even new, but none of it is likely to help a concerned citizen determine whether or not the stadium is good public policy. Of course the truncated review process doesn't really allow the public or its representatives much say in the matter, so it may be a moot point.

The pervasiveness of the problem makes it difficult to assign blame to one media outlet or even one type of media. And it's hard to even blame the media when our elected officials keep moving the focus from the substance of these issues to personal politics and minor details. In the end, the onus falls on the civic community and interested members of the public to analyze the information that exists and to try our best to push the politicians to answer the tough questions. Because ten years from now if the transit system is in crisis or the Far West Side has been devastated by a football stadium, no one is going to remember how much MTA officials earned or how many Knicks games the Mayor attended.

Roads Versus Rails: For A Tasty Built Environment, Choose What Suits You

Which is better, a fresh red apple or a juicy t-bone steak? Or how about a light, cheese soufflé, versus some scrambled eggs and hash browns?

It depends, as almost anyone would answer, on what you like. Taste is subjective.

Somehow, the concept of subjectivity is lost when various “experts” attempt to determine whether travel by transit is better than travel by car. Rather than accepting that trains, trolleys and trams do different things in different circumstances than vehicles, roads and highways – and then seeking to understand what those different things are – they insist on trying to find some objective way to say one is better than another.

Both sides are not equally to blame here. While few if any transit lovers seek to eliminate all highway funding, a band of car and road lovers have declared the equivalent of an American jihad against transit, particularly rail-oriented transit. These choo-choo train haters hope to stamp out all forms of travel by track, and complete the transformation of the country into a land of solely tires on asphalt.

This debate is almost absent in the Tri-state region, because we know commuter trains, subways and light rail make our region work. But we should still pay attention to the national argument, because it affects the overall ideological climate, which can generate dark clouds that rain on our projects. If you don’t believe me, just witness the actions of Rep. Ernest Istook, an Oklahoma congressman who stripped the funding from some Northeastern Republican representatives for even asking for more money for Amtrak.

Who is leading the charge against transit? A group of libertarian pundits, often supported by assorted non-profit foundations, who say the road, the car and even sprawl represent American individualism and marketplace freedom, while rail travel and the urban environment represent wasteful, heavy-handed government intervention. There is one huge problem here. Over the last century, local, state and federal governments have spent more money and exerted more state force in order to build the millions of miles of roads that now wind through city and countryside than on just about anything. So we are greeted with the absurd, but amusing, sight of anti-government, anti-planning types making tortured arguments about how state-built, state-maintained highways and what’s around them represent American individualism and lack of state control.

These diatribes against transit have been appearing in various journals large and small for years, but have been particularly intense over the last year.

In September, John Tierney, the opinionated scribe for The New York Times, penned a 5,000-plus-word piece in the New York Times Magazine that made the anti-transit, pro-asphalt case. Tierney basically said cars and roads are great because they allow people to go wherever they want to go, and to choose big homes on big lots in the suburbs. As for nasty traffic jams, technology and more lanes of asphalt will fix that soon enough, a position as it happens nearly identical to what “experts” said in the 1930s when the first traffic jams were appearing. Tierney even said that he himself didn’t even like driving or sprawl.

“For most of my adult life I didn’t even own [a car],” Tierney says. “I lived in Manhattan and pitied the suburbanites driving to the mall. When I moved to Washington and joined their ranks, I picked a home in smart-growth heaven, near a bike path and a subway station. Most days I skate or bike downtown, filled with righteous Schadenfreude as I roll past drivers stuck in traffic. The rest of the time I usually take the subway, and on the rare day I go by car, I hate the drive.

“But I no longer believe that my tastes should be public policy. I’ve been converted by a renegade school of thinkers you might call the autonomists, because they extol the autonomy made possible by automobiles. Their school includes engineers and philosophers, political scientists like James Q. Wilson and number-crunching economists like Randal O’Toole, the author of the 540-page manifesto “The Vanishing Automobile and Other Urban Myths.” These thinkers acknowledge the social and environmental problems caused by the car but argue that these would not be solved – in fact, would be mostly made worse – by the proposals coming from the car’s critics. They call smart growth a dumb idea, the result not of rational planning but of class snobbery and intellectual arrogance. They prefer to promote smart driving, which means more tolls, more roads and, yes, more cars.”

This is a pretty good summary of the anti-transit case. Notice how Tierney’s libertarian cohorts convert Tierney, a self-described car disliker, into a car lover. This is kind of like being argued into liking liver. Notice Tierney’s logic: “I no longer believe my tastes should be public policy” – as if tastes – likes and dislikes – should not be part of public decision making. This gets at a faulty line of reasoning common to the anti-transit folk, of which I’ll talk more later.

Tierney names Randal O’Toole as a big influence, who has written a series of papers, studies and books that try to show that sprawl is good, and attempts to have less of it are bad. One of the more recent O’Toole studies is “Great Rail Disasters: The Impact of Rail Transit on Urban Livability,” put out in February by The James Madison Institute in Florida. In this study, O’Toole concludes that rail transit is more costly, more dangerous, less energy efficient, and worse for the environment than cars and car travel.

"The stampede to plan and build rail transit lines in American cities has led and is leading to a series of financial and mobility disasters," O'Toole says in this study. "They are financial disasters because rail projects spend billions of taxpayers' dollars and produce little in return. They are mobility disasters because rail transit almost always increases regional congestion and usually reduces transit's share of commuting and general travel. On average, \$13 spent on rail transit is less effective at reducing congestion than \$1 spent on freeway improvements." Given the sweep of O'Toole's arguments, it was important that someone examine them in detail. That someone was Todd Litman of the more pro-transit oriented Victoria Transport Policy Institute. In "Comprehensive Evaluation of Rail Transit Benefits," released in November, Litman rebuts O'Toole on almost every point and concludes exactly the opposite.

"Cities with large, well-established rail systems have significantly higher per capita transit ridership, lower average per capita vehicle ownership and annual mileage, less traffic congestion, lower traffic death rates, lower consumer expenditures on transportation, and higher transit service cost recovery than otherwise comparable cities with less or no rail transit service," Litman says. "Rail transit systems provide economic, social and environmental benefits, and these benefits tend to increase as a system expands and matures."

How is it possible that two analysts can look at the same regions and data and see it so differently? Partly it is because O'Toole gets many of his facts wrong and misuses even ones he got right, Litman convincingly asserts. But it's also because a series of faulty assumptions underlie the arguments made by O'Toole and many of the "autonomists". These faulty assumptions lead them to measure the wrong things and to make the wrong conclusions from those measurements. Here are the top three faulty assumptions.

The More We Drive The Better We Are

O'Toole and similar analysts tend to measure cost, safety, emissions or anything else in "per passenger mile," rather than per capita or in absolute quantities. This converts what many regard as a minus of the American system – that we have to drive so much – into a plus, at least statistically. The more we drive, the more the costs per mile go down because the fixed costs of buying the cars and building highways are spread out over more asphalt.

O'Toole talks constantly of "mobility" as an aim of transportation policy. Under this logic, every new road is a good thing because it gives us more "mobility." But most people would prefer to drive shorter distances rather than longer to reach work, school or play. Driving is rarely an end in itself. Most would like to at least have the choice of taking a train, a bike or a bus, something which becomes more difficult the more roads we build. What "autonomists" like O'Toole don't see is that by simply building more and more roads, we produce an environment where people have to drive more and more, but in a sense accomplish less and less "per mile."

A revealing study by another Canadian, Patrick Condon, a professor at the Center for Landscape Research in Vancouver, showed this clearly. In an essay in October entitled "Comparing Sprawl In U.S. And Canadian Cities," Condon notes that Americans drive almost twice as much per person as Canadians, even though Canadians own about as many cars per person and earn about the same amount of money. Why is this?

"It's the highways, stupid," says Condon, who draws on research from a historical study he authored, *Canadian Cities, American Cities*. Since World War II, Condon says, Canada has built far fewer roads and highways. Because of this, Canadian cities are more compact, more transit oriented, closer to nature, and, many would say, more livable.

Condon's own Vancouver is an example of this. This sparkling jewel of a city perched on the Northwest coast ignored the advice of American traffic engineers and refused to build a regional beltway. The consequences? Vancouver is regularly cited as one of the most livable cities and regions in North America. But under O'Toole's logic it should be one of the worst, since its citizens have fewer miles of asphalt per person, and thus less "mobility." Also under O'Toole's logic, Vancouver residents should spend twice as much time stuck in traffic jams, since they have so many fewer roads. But that's clearly not the case either. They spend more time walking, biking and taking the tram, because they have options most Americans don't.

The Market Lays Highways, Planners Lay Track

O'Toole and company regularly say so-called Smart Growth policies, which usually include spending more on transit and allowing denser development, are bad because they force Americans to live a certain way through heavy-handed state planning. But no urban condition is simply a result of the marketplace. The market doesn't build highways or train lines. Sprawl, in its own way, is just as planned as Smart Growth or whatever flavor of urban design you choose. Sprawl relies on an immense quantity of infrastructure, built by government, along with accompanying zoning and other policies.

This strain of logic, that Smart Growth is some sort of socialistic planning, while sprawl is supposedly unplanned, is patently absurd, yet it runs all through the commentaries by O'Toole and others. There is nothing unplanned about a limited access highway. If you don't believe me, just try stopping one.

P.J. O'Rourke, the former National Lampoon editor turned libertarian conservative, at least acknowledged this contradiction in the December issue of *Atlantic Monthly*. O'Rourke usually dislikes government and government spending in particular, but he applauded the many miles of roads that a century of political jockeying and horse-trading created.

"Even a political journalist must confess that politics has a good driving record," says O'Rourke,

who apparently believes any road is a good road. "When the federal government completed its first national road survey, in 1904, just 141 miles of pavement existed outside cities. Today, there are 3.9 million miles of it, almost all of it politically funded."

Tierney asserts that market-minded entrepreneurs produced the old urban rail systems that were integral to older cities. But a closer reading of history shows this view is erroneous. Although the details are enormously complex, the state built and owned the New York City subways, for example, even though private companies operated them under long-term leases. The streetcars that once ran in every city were usually government-granted monopolies, often built with city bonds and rights of eminent domain. Transportation is a system, an engineer once said, and you rarely get systems without government.

Numbers and Generalities Tell All

In an effort to be scientific, the autonomists like O'Toole rely heavily on numbers and less on how transportation systems work in specific locales. They become blind to distinctions. In the final analysis, it makes no sense to talk generically of rail versus roads. We should talk more specifically about streetcars, trams, buses, light rail, commuter rail, subways and inter-state trains, and city streets, collector roads, major arterials, bridges, limited-access highways, and all the other variations of vehicular carrying surfaces.

There is no objective measure that can prove a particular type of transportation is better than another. Like cuisine, it all comes all comes down to what people like, and what they are willing to pay for. If you like sprawling suburbs, then vote for the politicians who will take your money and build more highways that create them. If you like urbanism, choose a different set of politicians. The market does not build highways or rail lines and never has, something you realize if you study history. Sure we can and should look at cost, but numbers alone can't tell us whether something is worth it. We can also acknowledge that rail transit faces an uphill battle in sprawling cities built around limited access highways. But ultimately only voters can decide whether attempts to change such a pattern is worth it.

The strange thing about O'Toole, Tierney and many other Libertarians is that they worship the marketplace, but embrace and advocate a kind of uniformity of the built environment that an all-road, all-highway transportation policy produces. It's as if they want us all to wear the same color shirt.

Rather than engineers delivering a good for the lowest price, we might do better to think of planners and politicians as cooks serving meals that are tasty or not. The proof is in the pudding. Do we like the environment around us? If not, that is a legitimate reason to ask for something different.

—Alex Marshall, Editor, Spotlight on the Region

Calendar

April 29, 8 AM – 2:30 PM

Save the Date! RPA's Annual Regional Assembly will be held on April 29, 2005 at the Waldorf-Astoria. This year's theme is "**Beyond Red and Blue: The Tri-State Region in a Changing National Context.**"