

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Editor:

I was surprised to read in the June-July Rail News that "Sonoma-Marin rail planners . . . Are seriously considering the use of refurbished Budd RDC cars manufactured some 50 years ago!"

I've been following the Sonoma Marin Area Rail Transit process since its inception in 1998. At no time was SMART "seriously considering the use of refurbished Budd RDC cars. . . ." At the earliest stage of SMART, Budd cars were listed among a wide range of possibilities, but were never seriously considered.

I saw this process up close because I was appointed to the SMART Vehicle Advisory Committee in the fall of 2000. SMART staff went out of their way to ensure that the committee would represent all viewpoints, even appointing one Marinite who had been vehemently opposed to passenger rail in the North Bay. There were, as I recall, fifteen of us, including the Sonoma County Transit Director, the Executive Director of North Coast Railroad Authority, and Golden Gate Transit's Principal Planner.

At every meeting the process was facilitated by Rick Brown of Results Group, and we had at our disposal members of two of SMART's rail consulting firms, LTK and HDR, both of Sacramento. Tom Matoff was present throughout the process as a key player on the consulting team.

At, I believe, the second meeting, presentations were made by representatives of Colorado Railcar, Alstom, Bombardier, and Siemens. Subsequently, the VAC made a day-long tour, riding Muni Metro light rail, BART, Altamont Commuter Express, and Amtrak's Capitol Corridor. Results Group even arranged to have operations people host us and answer questions on our ACE, Amtrak, and BART rides.

The vehicle types we considered were locomotive-hauled bi-level, locomotive-hauled single-level, FRA-compliant DMUs, "railroad" light DMUs, and "transit" light DMUs.

At our final meeting we voted. Rick Brown emphasized that although consensus might be desirable, the option of majority report and minority report was open to us. We were then polled, and the vote was strongly in favor of locomotive-hauled bi-levels. Locomotive-hauled single-levels were second, compliant DMUs were third, and railroad and transit light DMUs last in that order. When Brawn asked if we had consensus, no one spoke in opposition.

The SMART board, on presentation of our report, named compliant DMUs as the preferred vehicles, with locomotive-hauled railcars and light DMUs as the second-tier choices.

Lionel Gambill

Auto Apologists Vs. Amtrak

by Gerald Cauthen

Mr. Wendell Cox dislikes passenger rail systems. He speaks continuously on this subject with an almost Olympian sense of self-confidence. But who are we to knock his manner? It has served him well. It gets attention.

Usually he doesn't stray far from his main subject, which is to discredit all forms of passenger rail service except as applied to cities like New York that couldn't function without it. His attacks are as predictable as they are persistent. Americans love their automobiles, proclaims Mr. Cox, "and besides, passenger rail isn't cost-effective".

Visit Mr. Cox's website and you will find his lengthy "Curriculum Vitae": cross-country runner, commissioner, councilman, visiting fellow, adjunct scholar, adjunct fellow, advisor to governments, etc. He uses this background effectively to aggrandize his role as executioner of rail and unabashed apologist for a society dominated by automotive forms of travel.

To Mr. Cox, few if any of America's passenger rail services are of any use. Mr. Cox would have us believe that Americans love their automobiles too much to take trains and so it's pointless to waste public funds on passenger rail systems.

Underlying his aggressive pronouncements is a sweeping, but largely unstated premise; namely, that automotive forms of travel pay their own way.

How often have we been told that no general funds are used to pay for automotive and truck travel because the roadways are built and maintained with gasoline taxes collected at the pump? This premise is false. Yet Mr. Cox's constant attacks on trains invariably rely upon specious comparisons between the allegedly high costs of passenger rail service and the "pay as you go" costs of driving.

The truth of the matter is that automobile and truck travelers don't come even close to paying the full public costs of their driving. On the contrary American roadway users are the single most lavishly subsidized large group of people in the world. If you doubt this, read on.

According to the American Petroleum Institute, in 2004 gasoline taxes in this country averaged 44 cents a gallon, compared to \$3 to \$4 a gallon in Europe and Japan.

Why so large a difference? The answer is not hard to find. Our gasoline taxes are uniquely and unreasonably low because they don't begin to cover the total public costs of driving. In fact the amounts collected in this country are so low that they are more than eaten up by the cost of building and maintaining roadways.

Not covered by gasoline taxes are the public health costs of air pollution and roadway accidents, the lost time costs of congestion, the environmental and other costs of auto-induced sprawl, the social costs of neighborhoods ripped by freeways and, most of all, the huge geopolitical costs in blood and money of having to acquire our fossil fuel energy from hostile parts of the world.

It gets worse. By failing to adequately tax automobile and truck use, the state and federal governments of this country encourage more driving than would otherwise be the case and the building of larger and less efficient vehicles than would otherwise be the case.

Along with Vice President Cheney, some people might rejoice in this, boasting that it's an American's God-given right to squander energy if he feels like it, but there's a catch. When the flow of overseas oil falters for any reason, gasoline prices immediately rise. When there's a vacuum it gets filled.

By failing to recover the full public costs of driving, the American state and federal governments allow international oil executives and the oil-producing countries to pick up the slack.

In other words, by failing to charge enough in gasoline taxes our government encourages more gasoline consumption and thereby increases the outflow of American dollars to the hostile countries and international corporations who control the flow of oil. Billions of dollars a year that could be going into the U.S. Treasury instead go overseas and into the coffers of outsiders, some of who would cheerfully blow our country off the planet if they had the chance.

All of this seems lost on Mr. Cox. Blithely ignoring the grotesquely understated costs of roadway travel Mr. Cox continually harps on the high costs of rail travel. In this manner, whether consciously or not, he promotes both an increasingly congesting and polluting national transportation system and an increasingly dangerous American dependence on foreign oil.

It would be useful for Mr. Cox and others like him to take note of the impending world shortage of cheap energy and modify their rhetoric accordingly. Obliging roadway travelers to reimburse the government for the full public costs of driving would both remind us of the need to conserve energy and keep some of the dollars now flowing overseas at home.

It is time for people like Mr. Cox to begin talking constructively about roadway travel costs as well as public transit costs.

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