Car Czars Won't Yield To Transit Alternatives

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CAR CZARS WON'T YIELD TO TRANSIT ALTERNATIVES

MICHAEL LEWYN; For the Journal-Constitution

In most of America, including Atlanta, the car reigns supreme.

According to a 2000 report by the conservative Georgia Public Policy Foundation, more than 90 percent of metro Atlanta commuters drive to work.

Government exists primarily to serve the driver. For example, Gov. Roy Barnes wants to spend $2.4 billion on the Northern Arc (a highway designed to shift development to Forsyth County and Cherokee counties, which have no public transit whatsoever) but recently refused to extend $10 million to MARTA to prevent bus service cutbacks.

Common sense dictates that drivers such as me would feel secure in our supremacy, perhaps even secure enough to give nondrivers a few crumbs from the table. But not all drivers are so magnanimous. For example, Boston Globe columnist Jeff Jacoby complained a few years ago: "The car-haters aren't fooling around, and they're not going to give up until Big Brother takes the T-bird away."

And last year in Atlanta, the Georgia Highway Contractors Association ran advertisements claiming that evil environmentalists were "preventing us from driving cars and forcing us to live downtown."

And what evidence is there of this vast anti-auto conspiracy? Certainly the streets of Atlanta contain no such evidence; the clogged interstates prove that no one is "preventing us from driving cars" or "forcing us to live downtown."

Jacoby writes: "Don't underestimate the intensity of the zealots' antipathy toward private cars. 'We need bicycles and we need buses,' demands environmental crusader Bill McKibben."

So evidently, our fearless conspiracy fighters believe that if you support allowing anyone to ride a train, a bus or even a bicycle, you are an anti-auto "zealot." To be fair, reasonable people can disagree about the cost-effectiveness of some of the rail projects undertaken in the name of increasing transit ridership. For example, the Georgia Public Policy Foundation report criticized
proposals for large-scale commuter rail on economic grounds --- but the same report endorsed express buses.

But the blunderbuss of more radical transit critics swings against any alternative to driving, even the humble bus. When MARTA proposed to eliminate two-thirds of Sunday bus service last year and to eliminate all service to Roswell, the anti-transit zealots did not argue that the consumer choice they (pretend to) glorify should extend to buses as well as cars. Instead, they endorsed MARTA's anti-transit jihad.

For example, a Georgia State professor wrote an Atlanta Journal-Constitution op-ed column calling for the elimination of public transit entirely outside unspecified "high-density corridors." Fortunately, MARTA only partially heeded these arguments, implementing a more modest package of cutbacks.

Despite their pseudo-libertarian rhetoric against conspiracies to force people out of their cars, anti-transit pundits and activists are basically auto-totalitarians: They wish to create an absolute dictatorship of the automobile, a society where government, by building roads such as the Northern Arc to develop places without transit and then slashing bus service in the places that already have transit, makes it impossible to work without a car.

As for the millions of Americans too poor, too young, too old or too disabled to drive --- those Americans might as well not exist. And as for the environmental extremists who just don't like spending their lives in 2,000-pound metal boxes, "The time has come to run these plodding idealists off the road," wrote Heritage Foundation pundit Steven Hayward.