



**Dennis Ryerson**

## *It's time to join the mass transit parade*

**S**o here's Indianapolis businessman Al Hubbard, economic policy adviser to former President George W. Bush and a voice for limited government and low taxes, supporting the expansion of a costly government service — mass transit.

And here's Bob Palmer, the head of FedEx Express in Indianapolis, a business that depends on roads and highways to make final deliveries of all sorts of packages, coming out in favor of a plan to cut back on freeway expansion to benefit mass transit.

Add lawyer John Neighbours, chairman-elect of the Greater Indianapolis Chamber of Commerce, whose members in many cases would strongly oppose a sales-tax increase, signing on to a plan that would pay for transit expansion in part by raising that tax.

All three ironies suggest that a column I wrote several months ago may have been, well, wrong.

I listed 10 reasons why Indianapolis wouldn't buy into a contemporary mass transit system:

We have the weakest bus system of any major city in the country; how can we move toward rail and other transit forms if we haven't even taken to the bus? We are independent and like our cars. We aren't willing to tax ourselves for a system that isn't used by a majority of the people. We have space to sprawl, and we use that space.

We don't have much of a rush hour compared to other cities. We haven't taken interim steps to ease congestion. We loathe government regulation and aren't likely to accept laws forcing high-density, transit-oriented development, or higher parking rates downtown to encourage people to leave their cars at home, as other cities have done.

I also said we are not a city that attracts large numbers of young people of a mind to use mass transit. We don't have particularly high expectations for city services — we don't support recycling and we tolerate crumbling sidewalks and struggling schools.

Finally, we are impatient and probably won't tolerate the time it takes to build a successful transit system.

The Central Indiana Transit Task Force — chaired by Hubbard, Palmer and Neighbours and made up of business leaders and a university president — begs to differ. After months of investment and study, the group argues that without a system of toll-ways, passenger rail and expanded bus service, economic development will suffer in Indianapolis. The region will spend too much money building freeways that feed pollution and increase our reliance on inefficient and costly automobile travel.

Think about this for a moment. These kinds of proposals typically come from the government/political sector, which then has to drag a reluctant private sector to the dance. That was the case when I lived in the Portland area years ago. It was the case when I lived in Denver.

Only once have I seen a business initiative of this type and that was the push by the Silicon Valley Manufacturing Group, now the Silicon Valley Leadership Group, for expanded transit in the South Bay area of California.

Task force members are well aware of the sales job needed to convince Central Indiana residents of the transit imperative. They plan a series of town meetings, the first of which will be in Indianapolis, Fishers, Plainfield and Greenwood beginning this week. For specifics about each meeting, go to [www.indyconnect.org](http://www.indyconnect.org).

I've lived in cities with great mass transit systems. I've regularly taken light rail to work. I not only like the convenience but also appreciate the positive message sent by a city willing to invest in its future.

Yet Indiana already levies one of the higher sales taxes in the country, and there are those 10 other matters I mention earlier in this column.

But when the likes of Al Hubbard and Bob Palmer and John Neighbours say it's time to join the transit parade, maybe Indianapolis finally is poised to join Charlotte, St. Louis, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Denver, Salt Lake City, San Jose, Portland, Seattle and the majority of other large American cities that already provide alternatives to the auto.

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