

Here's why metro Indy should buy mass transit

On June 22, Star Editor Dennis Ryerson offered 10 reasons "why metro Indy won't buy mass transit." While the headline made us cringe, we have to admit that, as we read the column, we found ourselves nodding more than cringing.

While we certainly don't agree with his overall thesis, we must say that Ryerson did a great job of stripping the issue down to its key points. The difference is this: What Ryerson sees as impediments to mass transit, we see as arguments for mass transit.

Let's look at Ryerson's points one by one.

» "We haven't built a decent bus system." Ryerson is right. In terms of size, Indianapolis' bus fleet is 99th among America's 100 largest cities. So, should we abandon public transportation? No. Instead, we should consider mass transit as part of a comprehensive approach that improves all bus systems in the region along with other options.

» Ryerson says Hoosiers are too independent, set in their ways and car-bound to choose mass transit. Perhaps they have been in the past, but times are changing. For evidence, look at the long lines of people waiting to ride new commuter bus services, or at all the communities clamoring to be next on the list for those services. The price of independence is becoming prohibitive to many of us - and for a growing number there are no viable options to get to work.

» "We're not about to tax ourselves more for the benefits we see going to only a few." Nobody's begging to pay higher taxes, but we continue to see the wisdom of taking a regional approach to providing and paying for services. Think of the airport, public safety, education and, yes, even a football stadium. Even if you don't personally ride a train or bus to work, you'll enjoy the benefits of having that service in your community, in the form of less-congested roads, safer highways, increased economic vitality, and more.

» Ryerson says our low-density, slow growing, sprawling population doesn't create the proper scenario for mass transit. Agreed: Our geography and demographics aren't like those of other cities. But that's OK; what we learn from other cities is that a one-solution, cookie-cutter approach won't work. The proposed system is designed to meet the unique conditions of Central Indiana. And, besides, a smart, integrated transportation system

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can help encourage smarter growth and better use of our land.

» "We don't have a rush hour in much of our metro area; it's more like a rush minute." While congestion may not gridlock the entire region now, all you have to do is listen to radio and TV traffic reporters to know that rush hour is a reality in many parts of the region, making a lot of people late for work in the morning and late for dinner, soccer games and band concerts at night. We're focusing on areas of real need, not those places where that "rush minute" occurs.

» "We haven't taken even the easy steps to ease traffic congestion." Yes, other cities have done more with dedicated lanes and other traffic-control tools, and we should consider those as part of a comprehensive plan. But we shouldn't consider any single solution if it means delaying a better solution.

» "We're not about to buy into transit-oriented development." That sounds a lot like what people were saying a few years ago about Downtown condos, Monon Trail development and redevelopment projects like Mapleton Fall Creek.

» "We don't keep or attract young people." That's right. Why? In part, because young people prefer progressive urban areas with amenities such as mass transit. Providing that kind of amenity will demonstrate to young professionals that Indianapolis is a progressive urban area.

» "We don't have high expectations for city services." You know what would cure that? A bold, forward-thinking move showing that ours is a community that leads rather than follows.

» "We're not very patient." We'll get lessons in patience if we plan to hold on to an outdated system of public transportation while waiting for gas prices, congestion, sprawl and other problems to simply go away.

While Ryerson's column might have seemed like a declaration that mass transit is dead on arrival in Indianapolis, we saw it differently. We saw it as a challenge for us all to overcome the barriers to mass transit and move this metropolitan area into the future.

Besides, Ryerson ended his column by declaring that mass transit is "an attractive option." Once again, we agree, and we think it's time to make that option available.

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