27 October 2010

The prominent conservative figure William Lind is a widely respected proponent of Rail transit, and an opponent of bus-only transit. We at Rails Inc take our hats off to him, especially in a time when so many self identified “conservative” leaders have insanely adopted anti-Rail attitudes. Lind is an important voice in our struggle. Having said that:

One of Lind’s many stated arguments for Rail transit is that the more affluent (mostly Whites and Asians) won’t ride bus transit in part because busses are patronized mostly by poor Blacks and poor Latinos, and that young Black men on these busses are perceived to be dangerous and inconvenient to other riders. Mr. Lind has caught a lot of flak over this. Accusations of racism have been flying about.

Two issues need to be addressed here:

1) Racism: If any race or group of people is accused of something bad, the first question to ask is, “Is This True?”. If not, the accuser’s a racist. If so, something else is happening here and needs to be dealt with by the entirety of the target group. My own experience of public transit (especially bus transit) suggests to me that the most significant human threat to transit passengers arises from groups of young male riders of whichever race is most numerous along a particular route.

Whatever the truth or falsehood of this, American society and its racism are more complex than ever (this is progress), and those particular observations of Mr. Lind’s do not serve the Rail struggle. The fact is, people who can afford any kind of transportation they want will pick the best and safest they can get, whatever color they are.

2) Rail Transit Itself: What’s Rail transit good for? What makes a bunch of urban trains a better transit anchor than a bunch of city busses? Here’s a partial list:

— much greater fuel / energy economy;

— much longer vehicle life;

— much longer infrastructure life (tracks, streets, etc);

— low maintenance costs;

— thrifty use of land and materials, per passenger-mile;

— huge financial savings, personal and public;

— smooth on-time ride;

— renewal of city centers and first-ring suburbs;

— facilitation of walking, biking and neighborhood bus transit;

— easier deployment of on-board security (transit cops);

And here’s a big one: people really like to take the train! There a problem here?

As a White man, a small-time Civil Rights veteran and a Rail activist, I don’t see Mr. Lind as a racist. He’s just calling the shots as he sees them. But there are so many compelling transportation, economic, and environmental arguments for Rail and Rail transit (including most of his own) that we can safely leave the Young Black Men thing alone. Besides, plenty of African-American leaders are working on this one.

Here are several things we Rail advocates need to zero in on:

1) Good Transit should appeal to everybody, whatever their color, age, bank

balance, or political persuasion.

2) Rail-anchored transit is Good Transit —- for everybody.

3) We need many more Rail advocates who are not White, and for that matter, not men.

The energy issue.

A critical part of moving to a renewable energy-anchored future is conservation — doing the most with the least. Rail transit moves a hell of a lot of people a long way on very little “fuel”. Only the bicycle does more for less, and you can stick your bike on the train. And, the less energy we need, the less we’re tempted to increase our imports, mine our open spaces and endure the danger and expense of nuclear fission.

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