Sometimes, different people look at the same data but draw very different conclusions. The head of the Loop Trolley Company, John Meyer, thinks that if policymakers don't bail out the vintage streetcar line, bad things will happen. I look at the trolley's situation and think that if policymakers do bail out the line, bad things will happen.

Here's what Meyer recently claimed in a letter to local leaders: “Inaction [in regards to bailing the trolley out again] will result inevitably in additional burdens on St. Louis taxpayers, the loss of federal funds, the destruction of a transit asset and long-term harm to the reputation of the St. Louis region.”

Let's consider these claims in turn.

How is it that should taxpayers not bail out the trolley, they will come to shoulder additional burdens? Perhaps Meyer thinks that the trolley tracks will have to be dealt with in some way or another, eventually, and taxpayers will have to fund that construction. Maybe Meyer is right, but that doesn't mean bailing the trolley out is less of a burden than allowing it to languish.
poses any additional burden to taxpayers; it costs nothing for the tracks to stay in the street.

What about the loss of federal funds? Meyer could be right about this; should the trolley shut down for good, St. Louis could lose out on future grants. But it isn't clear that this is an unfair result. All the federal money St. Louis got to build the trolley could have gone to other, more deserving projects. There is a worthwhile project that didn't get funding because St. Louis somehow got $34 million in federal dollars to build a novelty. One of the best ways to reduce poor spending like this is to punish those who encouraged it. (Of course, the federal granting agencies should have known better, too.) Now, if federal agencies pursue a lawsuit to recover some of the grant used to build the trolley, this money would come from agencies supported by local taxpayers. While that's a real cost, the money would go back to federal taxpayers, some of which are, well, local taxpayers.

Meyer also claims that failing to revive the trolley will destroy a transit asset. While letting the trolley system collect dust isn't the same as blowing it up, this is more or less true. But I'd quibble with one thing: the trolley is hardly an asset. Assets tend to be worth something, and it isn't clear the Loop Trolley is worth much more than scrap metal. If the trolley were such an important regional asset, trolley advocates wouldn't be begging taxpayers, again, for a bailout.

The final claim Meyer makes is that a non-operating trolley will mar the region's reputation. This is true to a degree, but not the whole truth. The full truth is that the trolley, whether operating or not, is damaging to the region's reputation. The trolley carries very few passengers, breaks down all the time, and is, well, pretty much a joke. How is having the trolley clanking around the loop any less damaging than having it sit quietly in a warehouse? What's done is done.

It's understandable that trolley proponents and employees want the line to get bailed out. But the data are clear—very few people think it's worthwhile to ride the trolley—and there's only one serious path forward. Here's a hint: It doesn't include any more taxpayer money.

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