

Virginian Pilot, 10/10/2010

Published on HamptonRoads.com | PilotOnline.com (<http://hamptonroads.com>)

"ODU economist needs armor if he intends to tell the truth"

Through the phone, you could almost hear him shrugging.

From his office at ODU, economist James Koch seemed decidedly unconcerned Friday that area power brokers probably were seething about his analysis of the region's financial health.

While politicians sometimes seem confused about their roles, Koch isn't unsure of his. As a researcher, his mission is to "intelligently and rationally" study data and reach unemotional conclusions. Not lead cheers for Hampton Roads.

Call it economic tough love.

After years of consistent growth - when he often tossed "flowers and posies" at his audience - Koch was uncharacteristically gloomy last week.

Not only will the Hampton Roads economy sputter for five or 10 years, he told hundreds of business leaders at the State of the Region Address, he predicted Norfolk's light rail project will prove to be unjustifiably expensive.

Uh-oh. Not what the Light Rail At Any Price crowd wanted to hear.

Koch predicted that this commuter train would require more subsidies than most systems, saying as much as 90 percent of its operating costs will have to be picked up by taxpayers.

On Friday, Koch elaborated. He said light rail succeeds best in areas with large population densities where commuters travel to common destinations. Hampton Roads, however, is too "sprawly" for that model.

So, huge subsidies will be required to keep the trains rolling.

Think of it this way: If the cost of a light rail ticket is \$2, Koch said, the true cost of transporting that passenger may be around \$20.

Gulp.

The economist knows a referendum on rail may be coming at the Beach. He also knows he's supplying ammunition to foes of the project.

Not his concern.

"Put me down as a guy who likes public transportation," said Koch. "I went to Northwestern (near Chicago), I took the 'L.' I didn't own a car until I was 25."

Koch noted that his report doesn't call for the project to be scrubbed, but simply raises an alarm about the cost and the benefits.

"I want light rail to succeed," he insisted.

His research also showed that the national experiment with light rail has not been as universally "rosy" as many claim.

"I spoke to economists in St. Louis who say it would be cheaper to buy every commuter a Toyota Prius than it is to put them on light rail," Koch laughed.

No sooner had Koch's criticism of light rail costs hit the headlines, than critics began sniping about ODU's beleaguered maglev project. Maglev uses magnetic levitation to move train cars, something that has worked much better in theory than in reality.

Don't blame Koch.

The decision to try maglev on the Old Dominion campus was made after he stepped down as president of the university in 2001. He had nothing to do with the project.

This isn't the first time the Norfolk economist has upset local power brokers. In 2001, his annual report threw cold water all over the notion of a major league sports franchise for the region, calling such a venture a "losing proposition."

"If a region, such as Hampton Roads, attempts to attract a major league sports team, then it should do so for reasons of pride and identification rather than economics," he wrote.

Five years later, Koch made Beach officials apoplectic when he questioned why Washington should kick in money for sand replenishment.

"Only if one believes that taxpayers thousands of miles away should subsidize beach users and property owners in Virginia Beach does it make sense for the federal government to continue its massive subsidies," Koch said.

Look, the purpose of the State of the Region address isn't to spread good cheer. It's to deliver a dose of economic reality.

If leaders don't like what they hear, they can ignore Koch.

At their peril.

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