

Does state really want mass transit?

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A disgraceful thing happened in the California state Assembly last week, and will probably happen soon in the state Senate.

After the voters demanded gas-tax revenues be used for transportation - and after voting for more transportation projects in our most recent election, including mass transit - the state Legislature is about to balance its annual budget at the expense of transportation, and specifically mass transit.

Proposition 1B bond funds won't be diverted from freeway projects approved by the California Transportation Commission. But its funding of mass-transit projects, such as \$315 million dedicated to the first phase of the Expo Line to Culver City, was taken out of this year's budget after the Spillover Fund (from increased tax revenues as a result of rising fuel costs) was diverted to general budgeting purposes. Not to the freeways, mind you, but to items completely unrelated to transportation.

Despite the heroic local efforts to coalesce behind such overdue projects as the 405 northbound car-pool lane and the I-5 widening at the Orange County line, the Exposition light-rail line from downtown Los Angeles to Santa Monica - which is as close as we'll ever get to an I-10 HOV lane - will not be treated similarly. When \$1 billion gets taken out of mass transit on such short notice, something's gotta give.

Already, it looks like the Expo Line, a Green Line extension toward LAX and, of course, the much-desired Wilshire subway to the sea, will be the immediate victims.

Sacramento politicians apparently believe that transportation fund-raiding is still the safest way to balance a budget when the lobbying hits hard. Sacramento will continue to claim that sacrifices must be made to stay within budget. Of course, we all know that when sacrifices are called for, they should be shared among all portions of government spending, not just the mass-transit portion of transportation.

Some significant changes to ease the financial gridlock would be to reduce the threshold for transportation taxes to 55 percent and make sure that the Spillover fund be used entirely for transportation. Indeed, we should not use the words "mass transit" but "transportation," since there are plenty of voters from all political leanings who still question the need for mass transit. Mass transit will always be more popular in urban areas.

And why not? Agriculturally driven Kern County will not go for mass transit, and would be angry if transportation funds were diverted to urban areas for mass transit. But urban counties will always recognize the need for mass transit because freeways and roads are getting too expensive and unrealistic for expansion.

Should these concepts be linked together, it doesn't ensure that more mass-transit funds will be raised in Sacramento, but it does allow more transportation funds to be raised overall. More freeway and road funds from Sacramento give counties the ability to raise taxes locally and to create mass-transit projects without having to spend money on freeways if the latter are being preferentially funded from Sacramento.

Perhaps Sacramento will soon learn how difficult it is to create new transit-funding initiatives like bonding, gas taxes, congestion pricing and the like when the taxpayers/voters realize that "pro-environment, pro-mobility" Sacramento will again abscond with our investment to whatever it deems the political flavor of the month.

Fool us once, shame on you, Sacramento. Fool us twice ...

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