

June 14, 2008

Editorial: As transit takes off, state is ready to set brake

It was 1:40 in the afternoon. The morning rush hour was over, and the evening rush had not yet begun when Regional Transit General Manager Mike Wiley boarded a light rail train near RT headquarters on 29th street for a one-stop ride to The Sacramento Bee. The two-car train was packed. Wiley estimates that at least 60 people were seated and half that number were standing.

For years, transit advocates wondered what it would take to get Californians to abandon their cars for buses and trains. Gasoline at \$4 per gallon and zooming quickly toward \$5 seems to have done the trick. In Sacramento, the Interstate 5 repair has also helped.

But just as transit has become the travel mode of choice for a record number of Californians, state support for transit, always stingy, has begun to dry up altogether. In Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's effort to close a \$15.2 billion budget gap, he has proposed to renege on a budget deal he cut with transit districts just this past January. Under that deal, transit statewide was supposed to receive \$743 million from the Public Transportation Account. RT's share of the cut amounts to \$18 million, which translates into 12 percent of RT's operating budget for next year.

After a cut in state funding last year, RT reduced bus service 5 percent, instituted a hiring freeze and eliminated cost-of-living pay increases for managers. When coupled with reduced property tax and sales tax receipts locally, the governor's proposed cuts would force RT to cut 10 percent from its budget. That means some bus routes would have to be eliminated, and light rail would run less often or start later in the morning and end earlier in the evening. A 10 percent cut would translate to 800,000 to 1 million fewer transit trips each year as gasoline prices soar and the governor seeks to make our state a model in greenhouse-gas reductions.

No question, state lawmakers face a tough set of choices. If they give more to transit, they will either have to find additional revenues or make deeper cuts in other essential services.

But transit has already sacrificed enough. Over the last eight years, more than \$4 billion in state support that was to go to transit has been diverted to paper over the state's budget deficits. With more and more people riding transit, this is no time to cut state support.

Beyond protecting transit from the governor's proposed cuts, the Legislature should also approve Assembly Bill 2705 by Assemblyman Dave Jones, D-Sacramento. The Jones bill would make transit eligible for special Mello-Roos funding for the first time.

Under the Mello-Roos Facilities Act, cities, counties, school and special districts can, with voter approval, impose special taxes on new developments to pay for streets, parks and schools, libraries and other public works. The Jones bill would allow jurisdictions to use Mello-Roos authority to pay for transit as well. In today's environment, transit services are as vital as street and park maintenance, services financed by Mello-Roos bonds now.

Transit is booming across the state. That's good and should be encouraged, not stifled. The Legislature can help by declining to cut transit and by passing AB 2705.

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