

Are we willing to pay for mass transit?

Residents in the Capital Region say we want more and better public transportation. We're intrigued by the vision of trains speeding through Natomas en route to the airport; streetcars linking midtown, West Sacramento and Point West; light-rail running to Roseville, Citrus Heights and Elk Grove; and buses plying the streets of residential neighborhoods.

That's the vision of an integrated transit plan, called Scenario C, by the Sacramento Regional Transit District. Residents throughout the region chose it as the best option when more than 2,000 of them participated in community meetings and online surveys to give input on the district's new master plan, which determines projects and spending through 2035.

Now comes the hard question: What are we willing to pay for? That's what staff will be asking in the next round of public input as residents rank transit priorities and decide what they would support with tax dollars.

Keep in mind that public transit systems rely on sales taxes and other government funding. Fares typically pay less than one-third of the bill. Regional Transit does a good job of maximizing resources and efficiency, currently recovering more than 25 percent of its costs from passenger fares.

However, our region hasn't been willing to make a major financial commitment to public transit as similar metro areas have done. Take Denver, for example, which has seen population growth and freeway congestion like ours.

In 1994 that region began funneling millions of dollars into a leading edge transit network that, when finished in 2016, will put a half-million commuters within easy access of a transit stop.

Other metropolitan areas in California are also ahead of us. We spend a measly one-sixth of a cent per every dollar of sales tax on regional transit. San Francisco and most other Bay Area cities allocate a half-cent, while Los Angeles County and San Jose spend one full cent. Without similar consistent support, Sacramento's regional transit will never realize the robust vision that many residents say they want — and that the region badly needs, especially as we add more than a million residents over the next three decades.

Fewer cars on the road means reduced traffic congestion and improved air quality. Our region still does not meet federal air quality standards designed to temper the health risks we face — asthma, emphysema, cancer and heart disease — largely due to auto emissions.

This year could mark a public transit crossroads for our region. Many commuters switched to light-rail and buses during the construction on Interstate 5, and many more converted as gas prices rose to \$4. Ridership rose more than 20 percent in the spring, demonstrating that market forces are calling for change.

For the first time, the Sacramento Area Council of Governments has developed a transportation master plan that links the group's land-use blueprint to public transportation and spends 21 percent more on public transit.

Now is our chance to catch up. Yes, budgets are tight. But, as we work our way through the current set of economic challenges, I urge each and every county and city in our region to do its part to help fund the system we so badly need. We must put integrated public transit at the heart of the regional planning process — and near the top of the funding list.



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“Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.”

—Ralph Waldo Emerson