

Editorials & Opinion: Monday, June 21, 1993

Why We Support Formation Of The Rta

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LAST week a group of our local elected officials asked King, Pierce and Snohomish counties to take the next step toward solving the traffic snarls turning our region into Los Angeles, North. The plan adopted by the Joint Regional Policy Commission (JRPC) requires formation of a new three-county governmental body - the Regional Transit Authority, or RTA - to begin developing rail transit and improving our bus system.

The cost of this plan will be in the billions. The stakes are high, whether the plan moves forward or we do nothing. Rejecting it means our freedom of mobility will remain subject to the tyranny of rush hour and gridlock, which has resulted from decades of neglecting our transportation infrastructure.

The new agency will only be formed, however, if the county councils for King, Pierce and Snohomish counties opt into the plan. The King County Council, in particular, is sharply divided on the issue, with several council members opposed, and several others undecided. Our county councils thus hold the key to unlock the grid. We think they should turn the key by creating the RTA.

We have been critical of the overall transit plan through our group SMART - Sound Metropolitan Area Regional Transit. SMART is a coalition of citizens from environmental, business and civic groups in the three counties who felt the elected officials were not achieving the regional consensus needed for the plan to succeed.

We are not apologists for the JRPC or its plan. Our support for the RTA's formation should not be mistaken as wholesale endorsement of the \$9 billion rail/bus plan under which the counties will form the new transit agency. Our support follows months of concerted effort to change the plan, and our conclusion that it now is changed in enough fundamental ways that we can support it as the starting point for the RTA's dialogue with the community about how to proceed.

Our primary objection to the original plan was less about its bold vision - linking future "urban centers" with rail and other modes of transit - than its planned implementation. It called for one public vote to authorize an ambitious \$9 billion, 20-year program. It would be the largest public works project in the history of the Northwest. As a region, we have learned to be skeptical of grand visions with equally grand price tags.

SMART believes the bold vision can be achieved while developing the new rail system in stages, with a chance for us to confirm at each phase (or at the end of the initial phase) how to continue. We also feel we should strike a better balance between buses, rail, and other transit improvements in the first down payment on our transit future. The RTA is itself an experiment in regional government. It needs to walk before it can be expected to run a rail-building marathon.

In a flurry of activity during the last few weeks of its deliberations, the JRPC

responded to SMART's concerns and made several significant changes giving the RTA the type of flexibility we felt was needed to develop the regional transit vision in stages that make sense:

-- Local elected officials have embedded the plan with requirements that the RTA reconsider the amount of expensive tunneling for the rail system; reconsider certain decisions about where new rail would be built and consider a range of rail types, including "lighter" forms of rail like Portland's MAX system;

-- The plan now calls for development of the new rail system in phases and at a lower tax rate, while leaving the RTA the decision of precisely how each phase should be built;

-- The RTA must decide how much in new taxes to seek for system development. It will set the throttle for how quickly the plan will go forward. Unlike the JRPC, which only had planning responsibilities, the RTA will be accountable because it will develop, build and operate much of the regional system.

-- Each county must also vote to continue in the RTA after the RTA identifies a financing plan. Votes must then approve transit improvements proposed by the RTA and new taxes to pay for them.

The RTA's formation is merely the beginning of a process to develop a transit plan for the region, one that rests on the hard work of the elected officials in the JRPC. However, if the RTA fails to incorporate citizen concerns, its plan will be stillborn, with no more support than the JRPC's had when it was released last fall.

We believe the RTA should address head-on concerns about the public accountability of federated bodies, an issue brought to the fore in the METRO-King County merger debate. The plan under consideration by the counties itself calls on the RTA to "give citizens opportunities to affect decisions before they are finalized." While the cement on the RTA's foundation is still wet, it should develop the structure for the type of citizen involvement called for in the plan. The RTA's shaping of the plan to put before the voters will show us much about whether it has listened to community concerns.

There is also a compelling difference between METRO and an RTA: there simply is no other local government body that has the authority to solve regional transit problems. A new RTA will have unique assets for solving regional transportation issues: authority to fix problems that reach across county lines; and the ability to raise money to fund transportation improvements.

Gridlock choking our roadways is a regional problem that cannot be solved by existing local governments, at least as long as people are free to live, work and play across these jurisdictional boundaries. If businesses cannot move goods through the region, and be assured access to the region's employment base, they may move out of the swollen traffic watershed of Central Puget Sound.

This endorsement of the RTA's creation does not mean all questions have been answered about the plan or that the vital work of shaping the region's transportation vision is finished. Creation of the RTA is only the first big step - but a most necessary one - toward preserving our freedom to move during the next century.

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