

Commentary

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Prop. M Would Help Fund, Expand Crucial Alternative to Highways

By Keith Womer

Next week, the citizens of Saint Louis County have the opportunity to invest in the future. Passage of Proposition M would add a half-cent to the St Louis County sales tax supporting expansion of the MetroLink system in the county and operation of the current MetroLink and bus system in both the city and county. With the passage of Proposition M, by reallocating existing sales tax revenue, the county's plan is to increase funding for county highways as well. This measure would help build the kind of infrastructure that will move our region toward economic growth and prosperity, rather than allowing our transportation system to deteriorate.

Should the county subsidize Metro? In an ideal world, the price that each of us would pay for any good or service would cover all the costs of providing it. This is the basis for the argument against public funding for light rail advanced by Molly Castelazo and Thomas Garrett of the Federal Reserve Bank of Saint Louis. But we don't live in that ideal world. Our world is full of subsidies for highways and oil companies and auto manufacturers. Whether we like it or not, the decision to own and operate an automobile is heavily subsidized.

Likewise, in our world, drivers do not pay the full cost of highways and autos. Some of these costs are obvious, such as air pollution and congestion. But others are more subtle, such as worker immobility, highway injuries, and dependence on hostile nations for energy. Subtle or not, these highway costs are passed on to the population as a whole. That is, the automobile and highway system imposes substantial hidden costs on society, costs that are paid in taxes unrelated to fuel, as well as costs to our physical and economic health.

In contrast, light rail offers benefits to society in addition to transportation. It provides a clean travel alternative, and it fosters a healthy lifestyle by combining walking and biking with the work trip. Patrick Eckelkamp of the Show-Me Institute tells us that "in 2007, Metro carried almost 2 million riders attending special events" and that "The reduction in gas usage that Metro facilitated on these occasions, paired with reduced congestion on our roads, are factors that benefit us all — even those who don't use public transit." What is the value of having a transportation alternative when major arteries like 64/40 are

Summary

Proposition M's proposed sales tax increase would fund crucial transit operations and expansion, providing for an alternative to the highway system that benefits low-income workers. Widespread use of rail transit offers additional benefits to society, such as reduced gas usage, a clean travel alternative, and healthier lifestyles.

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shut down for repairs? In particular, high gasoline prices have led to an acute need for public transportation, so that low-income workers can get to their jobs. In our world of job cuts and dynamic changes, workers need to have a reliable way to get to locations where jobs are available.

Of course, as Wendell Cox argues in his Show-Me Institute commentary, it is true that light-rail systems cannot replace automobiles and highways, and that traffic congestion remains even in the presence of light rail. These arguments miss the point. While the light-rail choice does not appeal to all commuters, it does help many. The resulting reduction in traffic and air pollution benefits us all. Just this week, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* reported that while August 2008 saw a 5.6-percent decrease in auto travel compared to the previous year, it also saw a 6.2-percent increase in public transportation use, an increase that would not have been possible without the public transport option.

In our world, if we want clean public infrastructure that provides alternatives to the highway, then we must be willing to pay for it through a combination of fares and taxes. If we want a modern transportation system for our children and grandchildren, then we must invest for the future. This is just what Proposition M offers — the chance to invest in infrastructure so that we will continue to have a choice.

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