POLITICAL AND PUBLIC POLICY ISSUES RELATED TO DEMAND-RESPONSIVE TRANSPORTATION

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It is encouraging to see a growing interest in demand-responsive transportation (DRT). Problems of congestion and pollution, immobility of the poor and the elderly, and slow progress in the direction of reducing vehicle emissions require us to find alternatives to our heavy reliance on the automobile. Demand-responsive transportation is our only current major attempt at providing transportation services that have many of the advantages of automobiles. As such it offers hope that transit can be made a workable and an attractive part of solutions to congestion and immobility. And I emphasize attractive because that must be a key if we are to educate people away from the automobile.

I have always lived in California in the suburbs. I have known no other form of transportation except the personal automobile, except for an occasional airplane ride and a train ride at Disneyland on the monorail. Because I understand our conditioning toward automobile transportation, I am convinced that we must have an attractive as well as a workable solution to our transportation problems if we are going to get people out of their automobiles.

Many of my colleagues in the state legislature would have us believe fixed-rail transit can solve our environmental and transportation problems. I would suggest that the experience with Proposition A in Los Angeles should be instructive to those with high hopes for fixed-rail transit. Here the voters showed their opposition to any further local transaction of such systems. It was a countywide proposition put on the ballot in Los Angeles County, which has nearly 8 million people. The proposition was to add an additional 1 percent to the sales tax, which is already 6 percent in California. Half of that additional 1 percent or 1 cent on the dollar was to be used for the construction of fixed-rail systems or construction of transit systems, and the other half for operational costs. It was rejected by the voters. My hunch is also that the public feels that such transit systems either cannot do the job or are simply too costly, or some combination of both.

Of course, one interpretation of the results in Los Angeles—as well as similar results in Orange County, which had a similar proposition on the ballot—is that the public is irrevocably wed to the automobile. I think the more accurate interpretation is that the public will accept realistic transportation alternatives that are accessible, quiet, and low polluting. People want solutions to problems of congestion, pollution, and immobility. People are immensely concerned with our dependence on foreign cartels for energy and look to transportation analysts and decision makers to help ease our energy dependence. A statistic that frightens me is that 19 percent of the world's monetary reserves are now being held by the few countries that are major oil producers. We in this country are going to have to do something to stop the flow of dollars abroad for the purpose of purchasing oil.

Our job then is not to ignore or deride the public's affair with the automobile, but to create transportation that combines the attractive features of the automobile with the

capability to reduce energy and transportation problems. In so doing we must be realistic and efficient in our approach. We should realize, for example, that most DRT systems have not generated demands greater than 10 requests/mile^2/hour. Furthermore, many ridership surveys show that the majority of rides have not replaced automobile trips. Even those forms of demand-responsive transportation, such as car pools and subscription buses, that do seem to replace automobile trips have limited potential to attract a great volume of riders. Therefore, to promise the public that demand-responsive transportation will solve all the problems of pollution and congestion under present economic conditions is unrealistic. Only as economic circumstances make automobile usage more unattractive—as would be the case under fuel shortages and higher gasoline prices—can we honestly promise the public more demand-responsive transportation ridership and significantly less congestion and pollution.

Efficiency must be another of our concerns if demand-responsive transportation is to have a future in California. Many in the California legislature opposed DRT because of its labor-intensive nature and the resulting costs. Clearly, the more cost-effective demand-responsive transportation modes such as jitneys and certain taxis, which may operate with modest or no subsidies, will stand in more favor with legislators than highly subsidized public DRT systems.

In this regard it is most encouraging to see several communities in California developing contracts with the private sector to transport the immobile, particularly the elderly. Even though there might be debate about the impact of DRT on pollution and congestion, there is hardly any question that the relatively low-cost demand-responsive taxi provides valuable service to the elderly and to low-income people.

It is also encouraging to see the city of Los Angeles taking steps with respect to the private sector. The city has attempted to increase the supply of taxicabs in its franchise areas and is also experimenting with the provision of jitney services. Both of these innovations are admirable and deserve replication wherever feasible.

Santa Clara County has inaugurated a countywide DRT and arterial bus system. This substantial experiment, perhaps larger than any previous DRT system implemented both in area covered and equipment deployed, raises a powerful competitive image to the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) as a means for solving metropolitan transportation services. However, demand-responsive transportation is not the entire answer to mobility needs of major cities and suburban areas, just as rail systems are not the complete answer. Yet this image of an areawide, integrated system of extensive DRT zones and arterial bus services now poses a contrast with BART as a competing remedy of transportation ills. It is risky to go this far this fast with DRT, and Santa Clara's transportation planners and political leaders seem to sense this. But there are great risks also in being too timid or too distant in our search for alternative means of urban transport.

We in the legislature will debate the role that the state may play in cooperating with local and federal agencies in sharing the risks that fall to the innovators. We feel, for example, that neither UMTA nor the federal government for that matter possesses all of the wisdom in this country on what service characteristics should be desired by local jurisdictions in defining the future directions of research, development, demonstration, and implementation of advances in transit service. We will seek means of bridging the needs of local jurisdictions and the strengths of the federal government, with resources of our own, and thereby share in the risks that innovations in transit service and technology will entail for all of us.

I do not wish to imply that fixed-rail transit cannot be part of the solution to transportation problems. It has a role to play. So too might there be a role for reasonable disincentives to automobile usage. The point is that no one can solve all our problems, and no one unit of government or sector of the economy can solve all the problems. Only with the cooperation of the state and local governments—meaning both cities and counties—and the private sector can we begin to clear our air, help the immobile, and still provide the quick and accessible transportation so essential to the public interest.