State and Local Roles in California's Light Rail Transit Program

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In California, as in most other states, we have a tradition of local ownership and operation of transit systems. However, in spite of this, it is fair to say that the major thrust and incentive for the construction of new rail transit systems in California has come from the state level and has used state law as its vehicle.

In the past decade, a number of statutes have been enacted that set in place various processes and mechanisms for work in the rail transit area, including a law that created San Diego's Metropolitan Transit Development Board (MTDB). In addition, a more basic law has been passed that provided a substantial state funding pool for rail transit. In 1972, by a vote of the people, the state constitution was amended to allow state gas tax revenues—which originally could be used only for highway purposes—to be used to fund fixed guideway construction. While the guideway amendment, known as Proposition 5, did not open our highway fund to guideway uses completely, it did make it legally possible for rail projects to start tapping into the approximately $1.5 billion in annual state gas taxes, which otherwise would be restricted entirely to state highways and local streets and roads. Since Proposition 5 was enacted, we have allocated $142 million of these state funds to the planning, design, and construction of various guideway systems in California—most to the San Diego Trolley. We are proposing that some $439 million in Proposition 5 funds go to selected guideway projects over the next 5 years.

A second state law—SB 620, enacted in 1979—provided another major source of funding for guideway projects and other transit purposes, including local assistance. Under SB 620, specific appropriations of sales tax funds were made to various categories of transit uses, and urban guideways became eligible for a 3-year funding pool amounting to $90 million. To date, $80 million of SB 620 funds have been allocated, and we are proposing that an additional $118 million from the sales tax be set aside for guideways in the next 5 years.

But projects do not get built just by having funds available, and we at Caltrans have been willing and eager to participate in the various stages of project development—initial planning, design, and construction—that lead to a service actually being operated. There are some very practical reasons why we have been interested in being more than just a funding agent for guideway projects. First of all, since we are generally talking about any given project representing a substantial financing investment on our part, we are very interested in the quality of the project, and being involved in its actual development is our best assurance that the project will be properly planned and designed. Second, since there are a number of rail projects in California, we think it is advantageous to have an accumulation and sharing of technical expertise; this is accomplished by having a single organization (Caltrans) involved in the different projects. Third, as a very down-to-earth matter, we think that the best way to assure a continued state interest in and backing for rail transit is to institutionalize it, giving the state a role and a stake in transit work.

Caltrans is currently working or has been working with local government on three light rail transit projects—the San Diego Trolley, the Sacramento light rail project, and the Guadalupe Corridor project in San Jose. Our involvement is somewhat different in each, which illustrates the fact that there are a number of different ways in which a state-local partnership can operate. To illustrate this, I will describe the funding picture, as well as the policy-making and technical structure, of each.

The fact that the San Diego Trolley used no federal funds has been widely publicized. What has not been widely publicized is that most of the funds were state funds, the majority from Proposition 5 and some from SB 620. The project has a specific basis in state law, since it was a state law that created MTDB and gave it the responsibility for developing and operating a guideway project in the San Diego area. State representation on MTDB is not organizational but takes place by means of one appointment made by the Governor; Caltrans does not have a seat.

In San Diego, technical involvement by the state occurred in a rather indirect and piecemeal fashion. After the specific project was selected using the Arizona and Eastern Railroad for the basic system, MTDB asked for assistance, and we agreed to provide one of our employees to manage and supervise the overall engineering of the project. At MTDB's request, we also assigned other employees to perform other tasks during the project: right-of-way engineering and acquisition, geotechnical work, bridge design, and, finally, engineering inspection of construction.

As an organization, we learned two things from our technical participation during the initial leg of the San Diego project. First, we learned that our extensive skills in various phases of project development are fully transferable to the transit area and that our civil engineers, who in the past worked mainly on highways, are equally capable of working on rail. Second, we decided that the manner in which we had been involved in the project was not the way we wanted to proceed in the future. Because of the indirect and step-by-step fashion in which we got into various aspects of the project's development, our participation was not well known. Consequently, it did very little, if anything, to build up our legitimacy and credibility in the transit arena. Also, because of the unstructured and localized way in which we made our resources available to the project, our participation did little to help us build procedures and processes for application to other projects. While our relationship with MTDB has been an extremely positive one and we have been most impressed with the caliber of MTDB, I think we, as an organization, could have gained more technically from the experience than we did. With the light rail project in Sacramento, we are putting to use the lessons we learned in San Diego.

Although as in San Diego, there is very little local funding in the Sacramento project, both federal and state funds are going to be used. The federal funds are Interstate transfer monies. The rail project was developed as the final outcome of a cooperative state-local process to drop the Interstate highway project in question and to find an appropriate substitute. Caltrans took the lead in initiating the process.

Since the Sacramento project is not set forth in law, there is no formal organizational structure for its development and operation. The project is being developed by an agency brought into existence by means of a joint powers agreement between Caltrans, the City of Sacramento, the County of Sacramento, and the Sacramento Regional Transit District. All of these entities are members of the agency's board, which gives guidance to the agency's executive director.

Under the joint powers agreement, the design and construction is being carried out by Caltrans, the designated project manager. It is intended that the facility be operated by RTD, an existing transit operator.

This arrangement appears to be working well. There has been little or no friction between the members of the board, an absolute minimum of red tape and bureaucracy has been built up as part of the joint powers agency, and the technical work is proceeding smoothly on an expedited schedule.

The Guadalupe project in San Jose is more complex than either the San Diego or Sacramento projects, both in terms of the project and the organizational structure to conduct it. Since the preliminary engineering and final EIS stages are just getting under way, it is too early to draw any conclusions about how successful the structure will be.

The project involves both a state highway and a light rail line in the same right-of-way, which is new right-of-way, not one currently in rail or highway use. The project is thus more complex and much more expensive than either the San Diego or the Sacramento project. The San Jose project is the only project of the three that is relying on UMTA Section 3 funding.

There is no MTDB-type legislation setting out an organizational framework for the development and operation of the project, but the development of the project is to be carried out within a framework established by a joint powers agreement between state and local government. The agreement sets up a policy board, a technical committee, a project manager, and a deputy project manager. It is intended that the staffs of all involved public entities, as well as consultants, will participate in the actual technical work.

The partnership between state and local government in the light rail area has not been financially equal in California. Local contributions have been minimal, and the state has agreed either to pick up almost the entire project cost or provide almost the entire match, if federal funds are involved. This situation will have to change in the future; it is unrealistic to expect that either federal or state funds will be available in the amounts being sought.

Thus, the question of local funding is the key element in the overall funding issue. We should clearly be looking for more financial support from the local level. One very obvious way to generate more local funding in this state would be to take advantage of the provisions of Proposition 5 as they apply to gas tax revenues subvented to local jurisdictions. There is probably no better time than now. The state law increased the local and state gas tax bases just last year.

According to our estimates, if local governments in Proposition 5 counties were to give transit 25 percent of their increases in gas tax revenues over the next 5 years, they would be boosting guideway funding by $120 million. However, the California Transportation Commission, which adopts a 5-year spending plan for state highway and some transit work, has before it a recommendation from their staff that our proposed level of Proposition 5 funding be reduced to free up more money for highway projects.

Simultaneous with this battle is the issue over a new bill—SB 1335—that would change the local share of SB 620 funds, our second source of funding for guideway projects. Under current law, after certain state overhead costs are deducted, SB 620 funds are split equally between local assistance and the remaining project categories—including guideways. Under SB 1335—which is in part a response to federal transit cuts—the local assistance share would be increased to 60 percent at the expense of the remaining transit categories, whose share would drop to 40 percent. This represents an attempt to solve a funding problem through the cannibalization of one element of transit by another. The transit community should take a page out of the book of the roadbuilding community and work on a united basis to ensure adequate overall funding.

We in California can be proud of what we have accomplished in the last few years with regard to light rail. This would not have been possible without state interest and state funding. But if we are going to sustain the level of effort we now have under way, we will need a local, as well as a state, funding commitment. With state and local government working together, there is no limit to what we can accomplish.

Potential for Light Rail Transit: Local Perspective

RON DIRIDON, Transit District Board of Supervisors, Santa Clara County

The advantages of light rail transit are needed now. The Santa Clara County transit experience dramatizes that point.

Santa Clara County is Silicon Valley: 1.3 million people—more than twice the population of 20 years ago. In 1975, there were 506 000 jobs in our valley; today there are more than 700 000 jobs, and 840 000 are conservatively projected for 1990. That is a 170 percent increase in our 1975 employment base, and we have had no significant highway expansion. You can imagine the massive commuter congestion.

Our transit agency began in 1974; it now has 650 buses carrying more than 130 000 trips per day. Our rate of increase continues to average over 13 percent compounded, making us the fastest growing major property in the country. But we have not scratched the surface of the transit need yet, and we cannot afford the operating cost to meet that need in buses only. So we began to solve the problem. In 1973, with UMTA's help, we conducted the first of four federally required studies.

Our Phase One Rapid Transit Development Project was a general concept study that cost $200 000 and 2 years of time. The results indicated a need for 140 miles of medium capacity transit—light rail—for our interurban link with a bus feeder and distribution system. That local system would feed into the Southern Pacific San Francisco Peninsula commute and BART heavy rail systems for regional trips. It sounded good; we wanted to build it then, in 1975.

Instead of going to the federally required Systems Level Alternative Evaluation Study, we tried to short cut, like San Diego, and lead into preliminary engineering. So we conducted, without UMTA's help, the Santa Clara County Light Rail Feasibility Study at a cost of $200 000 and 2 more years. The results confirmed the concept study and recommended a 15- to 20-mile light rail starter segment in our main north/south Guadalupe Corridor to interconnect the densest neighborhoods with our city center and heaviest industrial concentrations. The study, which would have cost $86 million in 1976, was rejected by UMTA because we had not conformed to their process. So we went on to the next federally required study.

In 1977, the Santa Clara County Joint Corridor Study, our Systems Level Alternative Analysis, was begun. The cost was more than $2 million and 2.5 more years. After studying 13 alternatives in 5 corridors, the results con-