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

ADRIANA GIANTURCO, California Department of Transportation

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 sales 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 continued state interest in and backing for rail transit 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.

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 desig-
nated 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 MTD type legislation setting out an
organizational framework for the development and opera-
tion 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 com-
mittee, 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 Pro-
position 5 as they apply to gas tax revenues subvented to
local jurisdictions. There is probably no better time than
now. The state increased the local and state gas tax
base 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.

In California we 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 DIRDON, 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 com-
muter 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.
As 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-