

Legislative proposals jeopardize progress on transit

Written by
Thursday, 24 March 2011 14:39

Several bills introduced by state legislators threaten to halt progress on key transit initiatives and stand to harm our state's current and future economic competitiveness. It is critically important that legislative leaders hear from residents and business leaders that now is not the time to decimate well-planned efforts to expand our transportation system through strategic transit investments.

The Minnesota House of Representatives Transportation and Policy Committee is expected to pass a budget bill later tonight which has several very negative implications for transit. It proposes to eliminate general fund support for Metro Transit's operating budget (approximately \$120 million over the next biennium, or two year budgeting period). To fill this hole, the bill seeks to divert at least \$30 million in 2012 and at least \$39 million in 2013 of the proceeds of the ¼-cent sales tax levied by the five metro counties participating in the Counties Transit Improvement Board (CTIB), a tax which was enacted in 2008 for the purpose of expanding our regional system of light-rail, commuter rail, and bus rapid transit lines.

CTIB invests in capital and operating grants for projects including Central Corridor LRT, Southwest LRT, Northstar Commuter Rail, Hiawatha LRT, Cedar Avenue BRT, and I-35W BRT. The budget bill under discussion in the House Transportation Committee will leave county commissioners to explain to the residents bearing the burden of the tax that these revenues are no longer available for those purposes and the promised projects may be delayed or cancelled as a result.

Hennepin County issued approximately \$100 million in bonds last year on behalf of CTIB. The proposal by the Legislature may jeopardize covenants that have been made to the bond holders as well as Hennepin County's AAA bond rating. This also could raise questions about bond issues by any local unit of government in Minnesota, thus raising interest rates and causing taxpayers more money.

Following a vote on the budget bill in the House Transportation Committee, it will be forwarded to the House Ways and Means Committee.

Please contact leaders in the House and Senate (listed below) to let them know you oppose this unprecedented raid on local taxes and this breaking faith with the counties who have played exactly by the rules laid out by the Legislature.

Other legislation introduced this session proposes additional drastic actions against transit, including a bill to halt to construction on the Central Corridor project; a bill to eliminate the ability of county regional rail authorities to impose a tax levy; legislation to cancel several previously funded bonding requests, including \$26 million for high speed and passenger rail; and just introduced today, legislation which seeks to cancel \$42 million in state bonding funds for Central Corridor approved by the Legislature and Governor Pawlenty in 2008.

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