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**Time for state to get on board, find transit funds**

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After so many years of disappointment, two events in the past couple of weeks give me hope for the future of transit and commuter rail in this region.

First, in mid-August, the Georgia Department of Transportation took an undivided stand in support of commuter rail. The vote was significant on several levels.

The intermodal committee, under the leadership of Larry Walker, urged that the Atlanta-Lovejoy line be extended to Griffin (and eventually Macon), and it also supported an Atlanta-Tucker line to be extended to Athens.

But even more significant was that the Georgia DOT also acknowledged that the burden of covering the operating costs for commuter rail needed state funding rather than unfairly sticking local governments with the entire tab of a system that serves a multitude of counties.

And DOT leaders followed up by saying it was now up to the people "across the street" (meaning the governor and the Legislature) to figure out the financing issue.

The next encouraging development came from the Transit Planning Board, a true regional entity that has been studying how to best serve metro Atlanta with public transit.

Based on the metro area's travel patterns, the board's consultants presented a draft framework of a regional transit plan.

The good news is that the MARTA rail system that was planned nearly 50 years ago pretty much tracks the routes of the heaviest traveled corridors. The only problem is that the MARTA system was never totally implemented. The Transit Planning Board's presentation now offers greater evidence to finally build out the system.

"For the first time, you've got all these suburban folks saying we need transit," said Sam Olens, chairman of both the Cobb County Commission and the Atlanta Regional Commission.

Another encouraging development is that elected leaders, along with transit and planning officials, are openly saying that some routes once designated to be served by Bus Rapid Transit really should be served with rail.

"I want light rail along I-75 and I want light rail along I-285 [along the Northern Arc from I-75 to at least the Perimeter Center area if not I-85]," Olens said.

The good news is that according to the consultants, light rail is justified along both of those corridors based on the region's travel patterns.

This is a significant policy shift from several years ago when the ARC was advocating

for Bus Rapid Transit along I-75 and along the Northern Arc of I-285. Now the commission is open to reviewing and revising those plans.

"Not only is there flexibility, the ARC expects to take the results of this work and use it to amend our transportation plan," said Tom Weyandt, the ARC's director of comprehensive planning.

And when the Transit Planning Board convenes for its retreat later this month, metro leaders seem ready to start addressing the real core of the problem — funding and implementation.

"We all know what is needed for transit on a regional basis," Olens reaffirmed. "The questions are: 'What is it going to cost?' and 'How are we going to pay for it?'"

A couple of years ago when the Transit Planning Board was being formed, I argued that we've done enough planning. What we needed was to figure out how to pay for transit, particularly operating shortfalls, and to create an efficient regional entity to oversee, implement and operate transit in metro Atlanta.

But maybe we weren't ready then. It may have taken two years for metro leaders to truly understand the need for transit and come to a regional consensus.

"I'm very optimistic," said Richard McCrillis, MARTA's general manager. "I think we're moving in the right direction, and everybody understands the problem."

And once again, regional leaders were ready to say that now it's up to the state — the governor and the Legislature — to figure out how best to fund transit.

The ARC is on record supporting a regional sales tax to help pay for transportation projects in the metro area. The commission, at its last executive committee meeting, adopted a policy saying that 100 percent of what is collected in the region should be reinvested in the region.

Such a sales tax would not have the same archaic restriction as the state's gas tax that limits funding to just roads and bridges. If regional leaders are bold enough, they also should designate that at least 50 percent of the sales tax should go toward transit projects.

But ultimately, it will be up to Gov. Sonny Perdue and the General Assembly to get on board with both commuter rail and transit. There are rumblings that the governor might actually present a transportation agenda, complete with a funding proposal, before the Legislature convenes in January.

Also, Lt. Gov. Casey Cagle has said that his top two priorities this coming session will be transportation and health care.

All these signs are encouraging. We now have consensus from the Georgia DOT that we need to start implementing a commuter rail network. We have top metro leaders saying we need transit to serve the region. And we have everyone looking to our top state officials to provide real leadership to help build and fund transit and transportation projects in the future.

As I've said, my hopes for regional transit and rail have been dashed time and time again. Now I'm hoping against hope that this time I won't be disappointed.