

Central Lane Metropolitan Planning Organization

From: Bill Northrup [blar3@juno.com]
Sent: Wednesday, April 13, 2011 6:25 AM
To: Central Lane Metropolitan Planning Organization
Subject: Metropolitan Policy Committee: Input before your vote on EmX
Metropolitan Policy Committee,

I ask you to vote no on the West Eugene EmX.

Here are the facts as I see them upon which I make my decision, upon which you also may agree.

One,

In 20 years, the most gain we get is 4.3%, which is equivalent to adding 1 new rider to every 25 current riders on that route. That is not a statistically significant number, and indicates this project is barely discernable from doing nothing. I would think that for less than 10% of the 90 million in an advertising campaign we could raise ridership that same amount, just by the exampleship of our public leaders themselves using busses to travel to and from work instead of taking their cars. So again, what a colossal waste of \$92 million dollars to accomplish 4.3% grow on that route.

Two,

The break even point on the best route was in 16 years, just for operating costs alone. The next two were at about 42 - 46 years, and the last one was past 130 years. These numbers are gained by simply taking your chart showing the break even and extending the lines of the other routes to see where they meet (half way to break even) and doubling that number, the same way you see 8 years as the half-way point on the 16 year break even plan. The fact that this project can't even break even on operating costs for so long, yet spend \$90 million of taxpayer money is tragic and not responsible spending of that money no matter what taxpayer bag it comes from.

Three,

The behavior of LTD in this regard is suspect and not appreciated and has earned them a reputation of forcing things down the public's throat while withholding vital facts. For instance, the Eugene City Council was blindsided by the late arriving news that selecting the second route was not feasible without more money from Eugene or without cutting other bus services. The city and all citizens should have known this all along. The fact that it came out later proves the lack of communication and willful hiding of the information.

The fact that the chart contained alternatives with break evens at between 40 and 130 years should have been pointed out explicitly early on as well. Instead, they were poised in such a manner that the focus was on the best route and only it was highlighted with a break even date and none others. Hardly the stuff of full disclosure, no matter how much one decides to squint and rely on technicalities in self-defense: it's not similar disclosure on each route, but detail on the one they want and silence on the one's they don't, but with just enough detail to provide cover. Again, hardly the stuff of the Golden Rule by any means, is it.

Together, these two things show that LTD is not revealing full information until their hand is forced. They are not trustworthy advocates of the public's best interest, and we cannot know what else they are withholding. It makes their agenda suspect and it surely has show itself hostile to the public's interest and need for full honest disclosure. If only for this reason, such a plan should not be rewarded with approval, because we really still have no idea what the full facts are and I'm doubtful we will based on the track record of repeated shrouded silence, secrecy or release of only one-sided facts against our collective public opinion.

Four,

The need for public officials to guard the use of all taxpayer expenditures, no matter the source. Public officials have a responsibility to judge any project first as to whether it is worth spending that amount of taxpayer money or not. It should not be the case that an unworthy project is approved because some other taxpayers foot the lion's share of the bill. Why is that? Because that is the definition of pork barrel spending that we decry in Washington. It's as if LTD has found a wallet with \$90 million dollars and no one will mind if they take it and spend it on anything they want, regardless of the return.

Normally, when you weigh a project's merit, you consider a loan to be appropriate when the loan will be repaid from the savings. This project can't even pay for the increase in utilities on the route, so to speak, and never claims to pay back to the public their principal. The alternatives at 42 to 46 years break even on operating costs mean that by the time I am around 94 years old, the operating costs increases will have reached break even. My sons, who are 14, will be about 60 by that time. Hardly a poster child for spending money to improve OUR future.

It is irresponsible to think that this \$90 million dollar grant that is sought is a good use of public money. In the end, the main criteria is this: Would our own citizens approve this if it came from their own pocket in the form of a bond or levy for the next 20 years or so? 4.3% ridership growth, 1 more person added to each 25 person bus? People would as soon go fill potholes as to spend it on something that affects so very, very few of the public in any discernable way.

Five,

Anecdotally, we hear reports about previous projections of ridership, and then see park and rides with hardly anyone using them. I have written before on the subject of committing long term to routes and frequencies of service in the areas with the most growth, if one is serious about changing a next generation to be bus riders. So far, LTD continues to cut the service it needs to have to change habits. I have said that I myself picked where I lived based on bus routes. However, when some routes are cut, I am left wondering. I suggested that core routes be identified that would not be cut in a downturn, so people could pick a place to live knowing they would surely have bus service, but this has not been done. I pointed out that once a person has to buy a car because the bus doesn't work, they have to use their car the rest of the payment cycle because they can't afford to pay for that and spend additional money on the bus.

All of this notwithstanding, one wonders what ridership would be if some simple respectful principles were applied by which LTD's routes and service frequency could be discerned as consistent enough to be relied on. And this is referring to your general routes.

The public is right in asking why we are willing to commit to more frequent service to show how great these vast expenditures of EmX money are when we could quite simply have gone without the millions of dollars in grants. If you took any existing route and made it more frequent, gave free rides on it for a while, and conveyed to the public that you HAVE to keep this route and cut other routes to ensure it stays, guess what: the public would start riding it because it knows it can rely on it.

Personally, EmX is given favored conditions not extended to any other standard route, but the favor could be extended to any ordinary route and achieve very similar results and all this without the expenditure of an initial 90 million dollars. It about the support of the route and the commitment, and the frequency and ease of service that makes the public come to and stick with you. None of this is being applied outside of these grants when it could be. It makes one wonder what the growth of the 4.3% ridership would be if you just applied the basic principles of commitment, consistency and frequency of service to the existing routes.

Six,

The minutes saved. They also are hardly worthy of big acclaim or proud display either. If a ride is 40 minutes and you save 4 minutes, not so big a deal to us. You do it in 20 minutes and you have our interest. The alternative route surely has the most negligible savings of time. This is not going to inspire the public to spend \$90 million of their own money, and this grant is some taxpayers money even if not our direct own.

Seven,

Freedom. If there are a quarter million people in the LTD district, and this project costs \$100 million, that is \$400 per person. If a household is 4 people, that's \$1600 per household. If this was paid for by a bond or levy over 20 years, that's about \$80 per household per year, or about \$7 a month or about \$1.5 a week, or about 2 tankfuls of gas at today's rates. The public would likely support doing something out of its own money over the next twenty years that affected transportation much more successfully than this one, if only we had such a project in mind. It's not inconceivable.

Let's not limit ourselves to spending \$90 of our collective national taxpayer money on a project we would not pass in a vote to tax ourselves with. It's very unethical to fail to wince at the expense compared to the gain.

In summary,

One, 4.3% (1 more person per 25 current riders) is not much gain for \$90 million of tax payer money. Two, the break even points on just the operating costs of the alternatives are so far out, it speaks to the fact we could not and would not fully fund this out of our own pocket if we had to vote on it. Three, LTD has withheld information and blindsided both the public and the Eugene City Council and is hardly in a position to be trusted that they have even now spilled the beans and, in fact, the public is dissatisfied they have such power and authority over us and want this to change not be rewarded. Four, it isn't a wise use of taxpayer money no matter the source and we as stewards if not just of our local money but of all taxpayer money should not vote for a project that wouldn't be a go on our own dime because it would not actually pay back the principal from its savings. (Indeed, all this grant would prove -- and already has -- is why medium sized cities down have complete transit grids: they can't afford it because it doesn't pay for itself, they can barely afford the operating costs years out from now, to say nothing of the original loan they would need to do it themselves.) Five, past projections haven't panned out and the principles used to operate a new EmX line, if applied to existing lines, may actually achieve all that and more without the initial \$90 million outlay and, quite frankly, why hasn't LTD commitment openly to certain routes already to let the public know they can depend on them for the long term, why hasn't it given more frequent service to outlying routes in the high growth areas and stuck with them, and why hasn't it given free bus ridership for a while -- mainly, why hasn't it committed long-term to a plan that changes the next generations habits by sticking out so they don't have to own a car but can depend on any one route to be there for the long term? Six, the minutes gained are also statistically insignificant and again point to the fact that \$90 million of any taxpayer money from any source is not being wisely use, not the least of which is during this down time, let alone in good times. Seven, it is not as if we are without alternatives: any good plan that spend \$90 in a way we the people would actually approve is quite doable for just \$1.50 a week per household of 4 in Lane County; what this means is that the public is not impotent to come up with an in-house solution; the real issue is whether the project has merit and solves our problems, because this one surely does not.

For all these reasons, I think it is unwise for you to continue on this course, on so many levels.

I encourage to realize you are empowered by the people, not empowered against the people. The people can and will support change they can believe in. The people need to be able to approve or disapprove their own future. The people will fund something they believe in. It is an unwise use of your executive fiat to overrun the people with solutions they do not desire (from other taxpayer money outside our jurisdiction in the form of a grant) when they are quite capable of voting for and approving one that they find meaningful.

I would decry my government going forward on this colossal expensive, with 4.3% increase and a few minutes saved at the inordinate cost of \$90 million of our collective nation's money while not even being able to break even on just the increased operating costs for as many as 42 - 130 years, all while having withheld information consistently and selectively and blindsided even fellow public officials. It's not the kind of stuff your race to defend. Given the abysmally small numbers, and how they could be achieved on existing routes with similar commitments of service and stability absent any initial investment, given that we can afford the same \$90 million from ourselves and would approve it if the project was right, why not stop this right now and do what's right by all concerned. This is not our last best chance at a public transportation solution, but it is certainly close to being our last best chance making ethical wise uses of our collective money in line with the needs and desires of the people it is supposed to serve.

Thank you.

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