

Mass transit will come only if region builds it

We've done it before, and we can do it again. It's a question, not of economics, but of political will.

The need for a regional tax to help fund a nine-county mass transit system has never been more acute and shows no sign of easing.

Now that planners have come up with workable options for the first leg of that system, taxpayers and elected officials must ask themselves whether they can afford to continue down the road of \$4-plus gasoline, perpetual multibillion-dollar highway construction and dangerously dirty air.

It will cost an estimated \$160 million to create "light diesel" train service along a 19-mile route between Fishers and Downtown Indianapolis. The Metropolitan Planning Organization recommends that approach as a cost compromise between old-line rail and state-of-the-art electric, though it would be adaptable to electric in the future.

It's still a lot of money, and there isn't any. Not in the current federal budget,

**Our position:
Funding rail transit is
economically, if not
politically, an easy
decision.**

not in the \$3.8 billion state Major Moves program (reserved for roads and bridges), not in local treasuries.

Furthermore, rail transit cannot be considered apart from beefing up and reorganizing the bus system, now one of the most underfunded in the nation.

Yet the sums in question, even before fares are subtracted, are not so huge when compared to the approximately \$750 million Lucas Oil Stadium. That amenity exists in large part because of a multicounty food and beverage tax, justified by the tangible and intangible value of the Colts' new home to the region.

Mass transit costs also tend to look a great deal smaller when compared to

business as usual. Local planners point to a national study by the Texas Transportation Institute, which calculated the Indianapolis area's annual cost from traffic congestion at \$478 million in wasted fuel and lost productivity.

Commuters and politicians should find it harder to ignore the hidden costs of inadequate mass transit now that the former are feeling direct costs at the gas station. If the former demand that the latter take action, the resulting regional tax probably would leverage federal and state support, which awaits a demonstration of public desire.

Communities similar to this one — St. Louis; Nashville, Tenn.; Charlotte, N.C. — have pulled it off, with minimal pain. Charlotte, for example, used a half-cent sales tax to fund electric rail along with improved bus service. At such rates, can Central Indiana afford not to start down the road to the 21st century?

A series of hearings today, Wednesday and next Tuesday offers opportunities for all to weigh in. To learn about ways to provide input, contact MPO and the Central Indiana Regional Transportation Authority, (317) 327-5136, www.cirta.us