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"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances." — First Amendment

Northeast side right for rail

Funding depends on the public

If the popularity of IndyGo's fledgling express bus service from Fishers and Carmel to downtown is any indication, Hamilton County residents are clamoring for transportation alternatives.

Hundreds of people have begun traveling downtown by bus from Fishers and Carmel each day to avoid high gas prices and highway congestion. The buses are running at 85-percent capacity and often have to turn riders away.

Such response is a strong sign that the metro area is more ready than ever for mass transit and that Hamilton County is the best place to start. It's the same conclu-

sion that local transportation officials have come to in their recent endorsement of a commuter rail line for the northeast corridor.

The plan, backed by the Metropolitan Planning Organization and the Central Indiana Regional

Transportation Authority, calls for a diesel-powered system that would use the existing Nickel Plate rail line from Noblesville to Union Station. A starter system with five or six stations would cost between \$100 million and \$160 million and could be in use by 2012, officials say.

The long-term goal is to build a \$690 million system along the corridor with more than a dozen stations that would serve up to 10,000 passengers a day by 2035.

The route makes sense. The tracks are already under government control and could be put in use fairly quickly. Such a commuter line could help relieve traffic on Interstate 69, the area's most congested interstate. Demand is likely to be strong from some of the 53,000 Hamilton County residents who work in Marion County and the 12,500 Marion County residents who work in Hamilton County.

The proposed technology—light-rail diesel—is more costly than a suggested bare-bones system using heavy,

used diesel equipment, but would be cleaner, quieter and easier to upgrade. The model would be far cheaper than the top-of-the-line electric option.

The MPO has studied the issue extensively and continues to gather public input. The biggest hurdle, of course, is funding. Mass-transit ridership nationally is at its highest point in 50 years, creating heavy demand for federal transit dollars, so it's likely the proposed system will require some kind of state, regional or local funding.

Ehren Bingaman, executive director of CIRT, says the goal is to obtain federal money to pay for local public transit, but the region likely will have to "demonstrate the capacity and the will" to build and pay for a starter rail line before the federal government would be willing to help fund a larger system.

In other words, if Indianapolis ever wants a comprehensive public-transit system like those in other world-class cities, finding a way to fund a northeast-corridor starter line is critical. Unfortunately, that's a tough sell in a struggling economy, especially in the wake of recent increases to the sales tax and the food-and-beverage tax.

We urge transit authorities to be creative in their funding proposals. Reallocating existing tax dollars and pursuing public-private deals for train-station development could ease the cost burden and be preferable to new taxes. At the same time, residents should look more deeply into the light-rail proposal and remain open to the possibilities. •

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