

By Ehren Bingaman

Over the last few months, Central Indiana has put a lot of attention on transit and, specifically, a recommendation to use light rail along an existing line connecting Union Station in Downtown Indianapolis to Noblesville.

It's not a new recommendation or even a new type of technology. Rather, it's the product of more than a decade of careful evaluation. It's noteworthy because every one of us who drives is looking for more efficient ways to get around. It's noteworthy because it will have a direct impact on neighborhoods. And it's noteworthy because many people are convinced it's time to end the study of transit in Central Indiana and begin developing it.

As we have met with and received e-mails and calls from folks about the recommended route for the northeast corridor, we've realized that we need to clarify a few things.

First, this initial recommendation for one part of our region is intended to open the door for additional transit corridors serving all parts of the region. In this approach, we follow Charlotte, N.C., and Denver, which made initial investments in single corridors, and after the first corridors were successful were able to secure funding for region-wide systems.

Second, this corridor would be the start of a system. We do not see a new light-rail line as the ultimate solution, but rather, a key component of a system of roadways, buses, sidewalks and rail delivering coordinated, accessible service throughout Central Indiana.

The Central Indiana Regional Transportation Authority believes that successful new transit lines will require complementary investments in IndyGo and regional bus services, allowing them to expand their reach and quality for people in all neighborhoods of Central Indiana. In short, we must approach our region's transportation needs comprehensively and equitably, making sure that, as we invest in new modes of transit, we work to make the region's existing modes like new as well.

This will require communication and



Bingaman is executive director of the Central Indiana Regional Transportation Authority.

partnership. It will require a clear understanding of the benefits and costs associated with these investments. And it will require funding. Specifically, dedicated, consistent and reliable funding.

As a state, Indiana funds local public transit with a combination of a tiny share of the state sales tax and local property tax. Cities, towns and counties may at times have the funds to supplement the state funding. This mix does not produce enough revenue to meet the demand for existing transit, much less take on the challenge of building new and expanded services.

As planners, we are often asked why it takes so long to get something up and running. Unfortunately, the answer is not simple. Partly, the time needed for development has to do with leveraging federal investment. Some of it has to do with the volume of engineering and planning that goes into building a 26-mile light-rail system. And some of it has to do with the process of careful study and engaging the public in the conversation about making this vision a reality.

We are working to have an initial fixed line running in the next three to five years. We think this system can use rail and have five or six transit stops in both Marion and Hamilton counties. We are working on significant investments in current bus providers.

We are working to immediately expand express bus in all regions.

We still need to bridge the funding gap, but are working with elected leaders to craft an acceptable plan.

As we confront the "how" of transit, we must not forget the "why." Businesses need good workers; workers need get to jobs easily. Our region needs to compete for good jobs and bright people; the best employers and brightest people choose progressive communities. Our environment needs a break from the endless parade of automobiles; our residents need a break from the cost of putting those autos on the road.

I know the same community that built a stadium without a football team, revitalized a Downtown that was on the ropes, and created new industries and communities where none existed can also put into place the piece of the puzzle that truly connects us all.

As we invest in new modes of transit, we must work to make the region's existing modes like new as well.