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Surviving means new strategies

Published By Times Herald

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The Bay Area's public transportation agencies, both rail and bus services, are in deep financial trouble as taxpayer subsidies and ridership decline. In an attempt to avoid bankruptcy, transit operators are increasing fares and reducing service, which only makes the situation worse.

In the past year, BART and AC Transit ridership have dropped 10 percent and Contra Costa's County Connection buses have lost a stunning 34 percent of riders.

The weak economy has played a significant role in reducing public funding and ridership. But the downward trend in public transit use has been a long-term trend not only in the Bay Area but in other large metropolitan regions as well.

Even when the economy has been robust, public transit's share of commuter miles traveled has dropped, according to U.S. Census Bureau data. In 1980, public transit in the San Francisco-Oakland area accounted for 16.8 percent of passenger miles during commute hours. By 2006, it was down to 13.1 percent.

At current levels of use, mass transit is not as efficient as it should and could be. In fact, bus transit systems use more energy and produce more carbon dioxide per passenger mile than passenger cars.

The energy consumption per passenger mile of light rail systems today is similar to that of passenger cars, and produces more carbon dioxide per passenger mile than hybrid cars, according to a study by the Cato Institute, based on Federal Transit Administration data.

While passenger

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cars continue to improve energy efficiency and reduce emissions, most transit systems have changed little over the past few decades.

That does not mean public transit is doomed, even in a weak economy, nor does it mean mass transit cannot be far more energy efficient than passenger cars, even hybrids.

The key to improved efficiency for mass transit systems is ridership. The reason bus systems are less efficient than cars is a lack of riders during non-commute hours or even during commute times on some routes.

If buses were only half full all of the time, they would be more efficient than cars and many rail systems. Both light and

heavy rail systems also would be far more efficient and cost effective if they did not operate with so few passengers during non-commute hours.

Public transit agencies must find additional ways to run trains and buses at full service during commute hours and at lower levels or, in the case of buses, not at all on some routes, between commute hours.

Creating HOV lanes on all major Bay Area highways would do much to improve bus transit. Subscription bus service on express routes, in which riders pay a monthly fee, would be more appealing and assure ridership at cost-effective levels.

What must be avoided is operating nearly empty buses and trains during non-commute hours or on routes with low ridership. It is a waste of energy and labor costs.

Mass transit cannot efficiently accommodate everyone, but it can serve larger numbers of people in a cost-effective and attractive manner, if agencies are willing to adopt new strategies. Simply raising fees and cutting commute-hour service is a recipe for failure.

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