

Transportation
By Mayor Pro Tem Fred Strong

Transportation must be convenient and inexpensive to be acceptable to the general public. Government has a basic mandate to provide the means by which all modes of transportation conveniently inter-relate. Balancing the equation is the most difficult aspect of government's job. Different segments of our population favor different modes of transportation based upon personal conviction, lifestyle, place of residence and occupation or activity.

As an overarching public entity, government must provide basic and adequate interfacing between each and every common method of getting people and goods from place to place. From walking to flying this includes automobiles, buses, motorcycles, trucks, trains, bicycles, boats, ships, etc. Together these provide the interaction that allows a civilization to function.

Surface Infrastructure

Highways, freeways, roads, bike paths, hiking trails, local and inter-city railway beds and tracks, airport runways and taxi-ways, and the storage facilities (parking lots, garages, hangers, etc.) for the mechanical devices that utilize them are funded from various sources and different taxes, fees and charges. Facility funding comes in part from Federal, State and, in some cases, local tax dollars. The type of tax frequently limits the use of the funds. Airport facilities; inter-city, commuter and high-speed rail operations; bike paths; hiking trails; bus and trolley systems all have their own independent and exclusive funding sources. A few of them have some funds that can be used for multiple purposes. Many of them have separate sources for infrastructure, rolling stock, maintenance and repair and operations. Highways have separate funding sources for system expansion and for safety projects. Transportation funding is one of the most complicated systems of finance within government. Much of it relates to Constitutional requirements that have been interpreted to restrict the use of funds to a specific relationship, called a nexus, to the type of expenditure being made with those funds.

In this Assembly District the San Luis Obispo Council of Governments (SLOCOG) and the Santa Barbara County Association of Governments (SBCAG) deal with freeway, highway, and public transit alternatives. We cooperate when possible on cross-jurisdictional matters and both have representation on LOSSAN. I have represented SLOCOG at every meeting in 2009 and made the motion at SLOCOG to join in funding the expansion of the Santa Maria bridge between our counties for our mutual benefit.

Funds are more limited at the moment but the economic situation has also caused bids on projects to come in significantly below engineering estimates. This presents us with a unique opportunity to maximize the effective use of what Federal and State money we do

have to work with. Many projects are moving ahead but we are also looking at what the appropriate level of service is over the long term.

We are aware that mindset and lifestyles differences in this nation are well portrayed by the land uses in Los Angeles v. the island of Manhattan. Los Angeles has devoted 85% of its total land coverage to the automobile, truck, etc. while Manhattan has only devoted 15% of its land coverage to that use. In Manhattan public transit is everywhere and plentiful in every mode. Los Angeles, on the other hand, suffers from near gridlock for cars and trucks. This must change in the next few decades due to environmental damage and the unsustainability of public financing of an escalating demand for more and bigger freeways and parking garages.

Integration

Funding complications have tainted the debate over balancing the system and changing the paradigm. Environmental considerations are pushing us away from single person motorized transportation. Economic considerations are elevating the voice of those seeking inexpensive, convenient and frequent public transportation. In the major metropolitan areas this is heard in the increasing volume of those demanding high speed and commuter rail system implementation, improvements and expansion. In the intermediate urban areas this is translated into action for improved bus and initiation of some commuter rail systems. In the rural areas it is to get some dial-a-ride type services.

In the region from San Luis Obispo to San Diego the passenger rail authority (LOSSAN) is implementing immediate actions to integrate commuter and city-to-city systems under one governance umbrella to achieve better coordination of rail use and route scheduling. I have been intimately involved in that effort throughout 2009 and look forward to continuing in that arena during 2010.

In the area of biking and walking, the San Luis Obispo to Paso Robles metropolitan area has created the safest urban environment in the state by expending significantly more money per capita on improvements and linkages than any of the other areas. Accommodation of bicycles on public transportation and in clear markings and extensive travel networks throughout the area may have been a major contributor to that distinction.

I will continue to seek out cost effective ways and means to improve safe, cost effective, convenient transportation systems throughout this region and state. Travel is one item that is not limited to just local or regional solutions. It must integrate effectively with all other areas.

Government Transportation

I believe we could make a major impact on transportation solutions by using technology instead of face-to-face meetings that are not subject to the Brown Act. Even those meetings might lend themselves to innovative solutions. Such an effort could reduce state costs for rolling stock, parking infrastructure, maintenance and supplies. It would also make affected staff more productive during what would have been travel time and thereby reduce employee needs in some areas. All of these things should have a positive impact on future budgets and funding requirements.