

## **Let's Fund Public Transit Before the Boycott Jubilee**

*By Jim Carnes*

With most government services in tatters across Alabama, the Department of Transportation is enjoying an embarrassment of riches. But an ugly truth about transportation funding will soon bring the state embarrassment of a different order.

Just two years from now, on December 1, 2005, we'll celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Rosa Parks' heroic act that set the Montgomery Bus Boycott in motion. Vintage buses will be plying the downtown trolley routes. Plans are underway for historical exhibits and lectures, film screenings, recognition of local heroes, student art and writing projects, community dialogues on race relations. Montgomery and Alabama are the custodians of the Boycott legacy and the hosts for its commemoration, but rest assured the whole world will take part.

Among the pilgrims will be a swarm of national and international journalists. When they arrive with cameras, microphones and notebooks in hand, we'll feed them barbecue, give them our spruced-up Civil Rights tour, and introduce them to eloquent eyewitnesses. We'll outdo ourselves showcasing Montgomery's contribution to democracy.

The trouble is, the hallowed memory of 1955 won't be the only story these visitors are after. As they start asking where we've come in half a century, it won't take them long to pick up a few less flattering leads. Within blocks of Dexter Avenue King Memorial Baptist Church and the Rosa Parks Library and Museum, they'll find businesses, neighborhoods and schools sucked dry by suburban sprawl. They'll find a tale of two cities, west and east, marked by economic and racial disparities that five decades have done little to overcome. And there, behind the façade of refurbished trophy buses, they'll find a public transit system struggling to stay alive.

Some reporters – those from the New York Times and the BBC, perhaps, or Japanese and German television – will dig deeper. Beyond Montgomery, across rural counties, urban centers and suburbs alike, they'll discover an entire state held captive to a 50-year-old law against public transportation. And if they don't unearth the shameful secret themselves, advocacy groups like the Montgomery Transportation Coalition and Alabama Arise will be quick to point it out for them.

Amendment 93, ratified in 1952, didn't outlaw public transit per se, but it might as well have done so. This brainchild of the Alabama Motorists' Association (a precursor of AAA) made it illegal to use gasoline taxes, motor vehicle registration fees and other special automotive taxes for any purpose other than building and maintaining roads and bridges. The petroleum industry, insurance companies and other powerful proponents of highway transportation helped win passage of the referendum. City bus riders and rural folks without cars had little way of foreseeing how this amendment would hurt them down the road, but many of them couldn't vote anyway. Thus, by the time the boycotters forced an end to bus segregation, the fate of public transit in Alabama had already been sealed.

Nearly 50 years later, the Montgomery Bus Boycott is a world symbol of nonviolent social change. I'll leave it to others to probe the social realities behind that symbol today. My concern is a more "pedestrian" one: A symbol can't take a small-town mom to her factory job in a neighboring community, or a rural diabetes patient to his doctor's appointment. A symbol can't alleviate suburban traffic congestion, or reduce ozone emissions that threaten public health and stifle economic development.

The Golden Jubilee of the Boycott deserves and demands more than symbols. Before December 1, 2005, we need a new amendment that releases a portion of state gas tax revenues to fund public transportation. Toward that end, Alabama Arise, the Montgomery Transportation Coalition, Citizens for Transit (Birmingham) and Greater Birmingham Ministries are launching a statewide "Jubilee Amendment" petition drive. Visit the Arise website at [www.alarise.org](http://www.alarise.org) to find out more.

We hope that many legislators will seize this opportunity because of the improvements it will bring to the quality of life in our state. For the rest, perhaps the prospect of favorable global media coverage (or fear of the other kind) will be reason enough. But let's not stop at the Legislature. Let's call on Mercedes and Hyundai – the vanguard of our new transportation industry – to chip in a sizable share.

In two years, when the world's cameras come to Alabama, what will we display – a hollow gesture toward the past or a bold move into the future?

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