

Alabama Transportation Planning Needs New Course

By Karen Brown

The January 5 accident at Malfunction Junction in Birmingham was without a doubt a tragedy.

The accident, which resulted in the temporary loss of a major transportation artery, also highlighted desperately needed public transportation needs. Birmingham's Mayor Bernard Kincaid encouraged drivers to use the city's bus services as a way to avoid potential gridlock traffic during rush hour.

Mayor Kincaid now wants the city to lobby for state dollars for public transportation. His remarks were echoed by Jefferson County Commissioner Gary White, Birmingham's Metropolitan Planning Organization and Metro One, the alliance of Jefferson and Shelby County Chambers of Commerce.

It is not just the Birmingham area clamoring for public transportation. Transportation advocates in Montgomery, Auburn, Mobile and Wilcox County, to name a few, are also looking for help from the state.

Too bad they can't expect cooperation from state officials.

Alabama does not put a single dime of state money into public transportation. Our antiquated constitution does not allow it. The constitution says that money generated from gas taxes and license fees can only be used for roads and bridges. That may have worked back in 1952 when this amendment was ratified, but the state's public transportation needs have changed drastically over the last 50 years.

There are more cars on the roads, and thanks to our interstate system, people can more easily travel from one place to another. Still, there are approximately 700,000 people - one out of six of us - who don't have cars or can't drive.

For those with cars - wouldn't it be nice to catch a bus at the corner instead of driving everywhere? Or for commuters to have access to a light rail system running from one of the state's metropolitan areas to another?

Alabama does have some excellent public transportation programs, but all of them are paid for by using local or federal funds.

Wouldn't it be nice if every rural county were as fortunate as Autauga County? It has a rural transportation system that not only runs throughout the county, but to the closest metro area, Montgomery, as well. The Montgomery Advertiser reported that the Autauga County Rural Transportation system has seen an increase in ridership every year since its establishment 15 years ago.

Or, what if more of Alabama's rural counties had coordinated transportation systems? Choctaw, Dallas, Marengo, Greene, Hale, Sumter, Lowndes and Perry already do. It's called the West Alabama Public Transportation system and it 's the largest rural transportation provider in the state.

One of the smaller systems is the ride-on-demand system in Covington County. Alabama's Speaker of the House, Seth Hammett, thinks every rural county should have a system as good as Covington, his home county.

And, we can't forget Baldwin County's Rural Area Transportation System. Lauded as one of the best in the state, BRAT allows employers to take a payroll deduction to provide transportation to their workers.

The Montgomery Transit Authority's reimplementation of fixed routes and the Montgomery Transportation Coalition's advocacy work have resulted in an increase in ridership. People who use public transportation and those who fight for it know it can work.

But without stronger state support for public transportation, there are thousands of people left stranded and underserved across the state.

Alabama is now considering a change to the constitution, which would add public transportation to the list of what gas taxes and license fees could be spent on. This proposal has the support of Alabama Arise, the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce, the Governor's Commerce Commission and a growing number of supporters.

It is past time for the state to put money into public transportation that benefits all of Alabama. The local and federal governments shouldn't have to do it all. And there's another benefit: money that the state puts in may qualify for a federal match as high as 4-to-1, generating far more money for public transportation.

Alabama needs to quit stalling and get moving on a new public transportation plan for all our sakes.

Brown is a policy analyst with Arise Citizens' Policy Project.

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American Forum
840 National Press Building
Washington, D.C. 20045
www.mediaforum.org
forum@mediaforum.org
Tel 202-638-1431
Fax 202-638-1434