

Pasadena Star News

Getting our fair share

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This is the first part in a series of editorials on transportation funding in the region. The second editorial will appear Monday.

IN June, when the MTA board said "no" to seed money for the 24.1-mile foothill extension of the Gold Line, we watched in disbelief. But much worse, the MTA also let federal dollars slip away. It was as if Antonio Villaraigosa wadded up \$320 million in cash and threw it out the window of L.A. City Hall.

The given excuse was that light-rail should be funded locally, and the MTA was betting on a new, countywide half-cent sales tax increase that would raise \$40 billion in 30 years for rail, roads and buses.

But once again, the numbers in the sales tax bill by Assemblyman Mike Feuer will short-change the San Gabriel Valley.

While the bill delineates \$328 million, it is only for the first phase of the Gold Line Foothill Extension from East Pasadena to Azusa, leaving the extension to Montclair or Ontario Airport unfunded. Meanwhile, the L.A. mayor's proposed extension of the Red Line subway to the Pacific Ocean is slated to get \$900 million and the Exposition line light-rail project only temporarily slated to go from downtown Los Angeles to Santa Monica would get \$925 million. An analysis released by the San Gabriel Valley caucus found that if all the monies were added up, our Valley would get about 7 percent - way short of what our area deserves.

A new analysis by the San Gabriel Valley Council of Governments shows the San Gabriel Valley makes up about 20 percent of the entire county's population. Also, of the existing 1 percent in transportation taxes collected, the San Gabriel Valley pays 19.14 percent of the county total (about \$118.3 million) in 2007-2008. It also provides about 20 percent of the county's jobs.

We're thankful the SGVCOG is doing the math. Because the figures in the Feuer bill lean favorably to westside rail projects, and not-so-favorably to eastside and San Gabriel Valley projects.

If this sounds familiar, it's because it is a pattern we've seen previously by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority. The favoring of L.A. over the San Gabriel Valley occurred in the past, with the outrageously expensive subway system being built over budget, as compared to the frugal and on-time L.A.-to-Pasadena Gold Line.

It seems clear from talking to San Gabriel Valley legislators that the Feuer bill has a long way to go before it gains local support. We'd like to see a "20 percent" provision inserted into the bill that corresponds to sub-region. The same could be added for the Gateway Cities COG, which includes Whittier and other southeast county cities.

Also, we like the idea being floated by Supervisor Mike Antonovich to make the bill a five-year-bill instead of 30 years. After five years, the MTA must have completed the projects funded by the half-cent sales tax increase. Then the legislature can decide to extend the tax for future projects.

It is certainly true that local residents, when asked to dig deeper in their pockets, are more likely to do so if the money is spent on local improvements. It's been demonstrated by the passage of school bonds and utility user taxes.

With those changes, it still does not guarantee a two-thirds "yes" vote by a public suffering from higher gasoline and food prices. However, it would be a first step to more fundamental changes in the way transportation tax dollars are distributed in Los Angeles County.