

Lack of leadership brings bus system to brink of devastation

WHEN REPRESENTATIVES for the Central Midlands Regional Transit Authority came by to talk about the system's funding needs, their handout material included an aerial image of Katrina sitting off the Gulf Coast, ready to pounce.

Rick Silver, whose public relations firm represents the RTA, said the picture illustrates how desperate the position is: A large financial storm is brewing that could devastate the bus system if efforts aren't made to save it.

Up to 85 percent of the system could be shut down if officials in Lexington and Richland counties don't come up with permanent funding. The system, which now costs about \$11 million to operate annually, has about a year or so more in cash to keep it going.

The deep cuts wouldn't just cripple service; they would kill it.

That's ridiculous for a community that just received the All-America City award from the National Civic League. I'm positive that when the folks from Richland County made their winning pitch to All-America City judges, they didn't tell them: "Oh, by the way, we're thinking about shutting down our bus system that helps get workers to the community's businesses, hospitals, restaurants and other places."

An RTA survey found that 17 percent of riders work in government agencies, with a large portion at Fort Jackson; 12 percent work in health care, including hospitals; 9 percent work at schools and universities; and 15 percent work in restaurants and the food service industry. Since 2003, the annual system ridership has increased 30 percent.

Short of an All-America effort, those gains in ridership are about to go down the drain. This community has the resources, but it remains to be seen whether it has the heart to save the system.

The biggest problem right now is that no one is leading the charge to get funding.

Now the Katrina analogy is a crude one when talking about this issue. If we're going to use it, it ought to be in reference to the poor leadership — similar to the leadership vacuum that existed prior to and after Katrina.

While RTA officials said they had made presentations to local leaders, including Lexington and Richland county councils, the transit representatives said it wasn't the RTA's job to lead in pushing for funding. That's the purview of elected officials empowered to act, they said.

When candidates for Lexington and Richland county councils visited the editorial board before last week's primary, most said their counties must support the bus system. But they were noncommittal about the RTA's idea of using a penny sales tax to fund it.

"I don't know a whole lot about it," said Richland County Council Chairman Tony Mizzell. A fellow council member, Kit Smith, had a similar response.

About six weeks ago, Mr. Mizzell said no one had asked the council to put a penny sales tax on the ballot. But he said he opposed it because of Richland voters' passage of the local option sales tax as well as the lack of clarity of how legislators' efforts to cut property taxes might affect sales taxes.

Mr. Mizzell would tell me in a later conversation that he felt Columbia should lead on the matter because it is the one that negotiated the settlement to transfer the bus system from the hands of SCANA, a private utility, to public ownership. Richland councilman Paul Livingston agreed.

But only a county council can put the penny sales tax before the people for a vote.

And let's be real. Everyone has known from Day One that there needs to be permanent funding. While it's good for the RTA to make the pitch, even if it never did, elected officials should have been moving this matter forward. Representatives from the cities and counties make up the board; they know what the deal is.

Not only was it known from the beginning that permanent funding is needed, but as early as 2004, members of the RTA board — particularly Columbia Mayor Bob Coble — openly said there was a need for a sales tax.

Anyone who claims not to know much about the bus system and its predicament is copping out. The fact is, the buses haven't been a priority.

There is no reason for this community to be so ill-prepared. Not when we watched Charleston go through a similar struggle. Charleston, which made a deal with SCANA in 1996, wasted time before trying to get public funding. It took that community three tries to approve a sales tax. Along the way, its system was virtually shut down. It cut its service by 75 percent before the tax passed.

Some Midlands officials, particularly in Lexington County, have yet to buy into the concept of a regional transit system. One reason is because the system doesn't travel deep into the county. But the system plays a key role in supporting the Midlands economy. It takes many people to work, shop and play.

While some leaders debate whether a sales tax will pass or even be placed on the ballot, the RTA doesn't care how it gets the money it needs.

“We will be happy with whatever solution allows the buses to continue to run,” said Tommy Windsor, who represents Lexington County on the RTA board.

Mr. Windsor said that at the moment, what’s being provided is a “minimally adequate” bus system. Dedicated funding would allow the RTA not only to maintain, but to expand the system.

But it’s hard to think about expansion when the system faces drastic cuts. And the prospects of those cuts could be permanent if elected representatives don’t develop the will to support it.

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