

# Midlands must find cash to keep buses, economy moving

IT'S RIDICULOUS that the Midlands is even considering essentially shutting down its public bus system for lack of funding.

When the system was transferred from SCANA into public hands in 2002, we all knew the trust fund the utility set up to help operate it would run out in a few years. And since transportation systems don't make money (any more than public roads do), we also knew ours would have to be subsidized. Elected officials and leaders should have gone to work immediately to devise a way to pay for it long-term.

But they didn't. While they wisely created the Central Midlands Regional Transit Authority to operate the buses, no one stressed the urgent need for permanent funding. So now, with the system gasping for air, the transit authority is scurrying to get community support for funding even as it unveils plans to scale back service severely if it doesn't get help.

Purposeful or not, it appears the proposal to reduce service by up to 85 percent by year's end is a scare tactic to get funding. But the fact remains that the system is running out of money. And it's not because of a lack of effort on the RTA's part to make it more efficient.

Over the past few years, the authority has done a creditable job of balancing the needs of riders with the need to be efficient and cost-conscious. It has raised fares, added routes and consolidated and eliminated others while not cannibalizing the system.

But in recent months, authority officials have had to deliver the bad news that the bus system is running out of funds and faces huge reductions. While the RTA can raise awareness, elected officials must help find funding. The RTA has gotten about all it can out of riders.

That means city and county officers, some of whom sit on the RTA board, must rescue this system. Shutting it down is not an option.

Of the options available, the transit authority thinks a 1-cent sales tax is the best. It had intended to ask Lexington and Richland county councils to put a sales tax on the November ballot. But Lexington officials say they can't because of an existing penny tax for school construction. Richland County Council is expected to at least consider placing a 1-cent transportation sales tax before voters. The council must approve the vote by Aug. 14 in order to get it on the November ballot.

The transit authority says it needs about \$25 million annually to preserve — and grow — the bus system. A chunk of that could come from a 1-cent tax in Richland County, which

is projected to raise \$67 million. A fourth of that would be dedicated to public transit, with the rest spent on county highway improvements. Officials must be specific about how the extra money would be used. It must not become a slush fund.

We aren't sure a sales tax is the answer. But a community the size of ours must have a viable transit system. Whether officials use a sales tax, property tax or vehicle registration fee, they must find a way to make this critical investment in our community.

The system plays a key role in supporting the Midlands economy. It helps many workers get to jobs at hospitals, restaurants, hotels and retail outlets. Reductions being considered if funding isn't found include the elimination of much-needed Saturday service and routes to some area hospitals.

If our community is to remain vibrant and grow, citizens, community leaders and elected officials must rise to the challenge and provide the money needed to breathe new life into the ailing bus system.

The State June 20, 2006