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We need transportation help

By: North County Times - Editorial

Our View: Our government-in-action detectors were alerted last week when the San Diego Association of Governments, our regional transportation overlord, decided to spend \$425,000 of taxpayers' money for consultants to evaluate a piece of the agency's deeply flawed transit plan.

With arms flung wide open, we endorse the notion of finding an independent group of experts to help our failed agency. But that's not what local officials are up to. Instead, the review is limited to the agency's monstrously expensive bus and light-rail projects. Not surprisingly, the agency appears set to hire a group of proponents of bus and light-rail projects to conduct the review.

What North County commuters need desperately is a new plan ---- not to throw money away tinkering with or validating a bad plan.

In November, two-thirds of county voters elected to extend a special sales tax for 40 years to fund \$42 billion in transportation projects by 2030. The clear mandate of that election: Voters want leaders to reduce traffic congestion, the increasing gridlock that saps our economy, erodes our quality of life and robs us of time with our families.

But agency officials say that ---- at best ---- their plan will ensure steadily worsening traffic. Most of the capital improvements would fund public transportation projects, such as an extension of the San Diego trolley and restricted freeway lanes meant for buses and car pools.

Under the agency's rosier scenarios, about 10 percent of commuters would get fed up with gridlock, get out of their cars and use public transit. What about the rest of us, the vast, angry 90 percent? We get to hear lots of talk radio as we sit on freeways.

Thankfully, our leaders (the agency's board is populated with local mayors or council members), flush with unspent money from the voters, have a historic chance to fix their failed plan ---- the law requires periodic reviews, a process that begins this year.

We urge the board to hire a panel to examine the entire plan, not just the bus and light-rail pieces. And, always helpful, we hereby propose a few experts for the panel:

Let's start with Robert W. Poole Jr., an adviser to four U.S. presidents who ponders transportation issues at the Reason Foundation, a Los Angeles think tank. Poole led a team that last month concluded San Diego County can solve gridlock with a countywide system of self-financing toll roads along existing freeways. The scheme would expand our successful experiment with pay-lanes on Interstate 15, lessons the agency largely ignores in its 25-year plan.

Or we could hire James Moore, a national authority at the University of Southern California who has written extensively on "legalizing" transportation networks, his term for injecting market-based alternatives to government management. He is an expert on the failures of rail systems.

For good measure, we ought to hear from Bent Flyvbjerg, the Danish academic who wrote "Megaprojects and Risk." The book studied 258 highway and rail projects in 20 countries, finding cost overruns and erroneous traffic forecasts in nearly all of them. Among his conclusions: "Cost estimates used in public debates, media coverage, and decision-making for transport infrastructure are highly, systematically, and significantly deceptive. So are the cost-benefit analyses."

And finally, we could simply drive our politicians to Texas, where leaders decided that all transportation projects must fundamentally reduce traffic congestion. They are looking at toll roads, new technology and public-private partnerships to deal with growth rates that exceed those in California.

Our public servants at the San Diego Association of Governments have asked for outside help. We insist that the board settle for nothing less than a fresh review of its entire plan.

