

Mass transit needs mass support

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Kershaw County got some interesting news earlier this month when a study conducted by the Central Midlands Council of Governments found that the corridor from Camden to Columbia ranked highest as the most promising for the future implementation of a commuter rail. The study examined three potential routes: Camden to Columbia, Newberry/Chapin to Columbia, and Batesburg-Leesville to Columbia. The study based its evaluation on five criteria: potential ridership, access to stations and land use support, cost of implementation, public opinion, and ease of implementation.

Certainly the concept of a commuter rail in our area is innovative and forward-thinking and seems to be good policy. The question of feasibility is quite another matter. Feasibility will in large part be determined by the commitment of the population to support such a system with their participation and tax dollars. Mass transit systems never pay for themselves; they exist through government subsidies.

South Carolina has not made public transportation a priority. For example, in the new state budget, only \$1.4 million was allocated to the Department of Transportation (DOT) for mass transit. The gasoline user fee, of which twenty-five hundredths of a cent on each gallon of gasoline is apportioned to the DOT for the promotion of mass transit, only generates another \$6 million. Most of this money from state sources is used to match federal funds for capital expenses only, such as the purchase of buses. Operations depend on money generated from fares and local governments.

The fact that SC has the fourth lowest gas tax in the nation, has the nation's lowest funding per mile, and, consequently, cannot adequately maintain its current road system does not bode well for new projects like commuter rail. Overall, the state's current commitment to mass transit is hardly sufficient considering that the price tag for the proposed rail from Camden to Columbia is \$80 million.

All hope is not lost, however. There are several reasons to be optimistic that commuter rail in Kershaw County may be a possibility if certain trends continue and opportunities are captured.

One key to proving that Camden is ready for a commuter rail to Columbia is to increase the demand for the SmartRide Program. We are very fortunate to have a bus service from Camden to Columbia during the workweek. This is a limited program, offering only two runs, picking up twice in the mornings and returning twice in the afternoons. However, there have been steady gains in passenger boardings. DOT reports that there were 1118 passenger boardings during the month of June 2006. Ridership peaked at 1345 boardings in October 2005.

But there are many more potential riders. According to the 2000 Census, 6,582 people commuted from Kershaw County to Richland County. Considering that we've grown in

population since 2000, and that most of that growth has been in the West Wateree area, the number of commuters to Richland County has probably increased significantly.

Additionally, we must support the recently revived Kershaw Connections. This transportation opportunity brings residents from the Bethune/Cassatt area and the Lugoff/Elgin area into Camden, but is limited to Tuesdays and Thursdays. This service is especially important for low-income citizens who need transportation to medical appointments, services, and supplies.

In addition to continuing to build ridership, we must plan areas for future use as stops. Preferably, these areas should be zoned appropriately in order to attract residential areas, services, and commercial centers to these future stations. Ongoing communication and coordination with freight rail operators will be necessary for all parties to buy into the process. Additionally, local, state, and national governmental support will be needed to implement any plan.

With gas prices skyrocketing, it is easier to see the benefits of mass transit. For instance, by using a public transportation to commute to work, a person can save hundreds or thousands of dollars in fuel costs per year, depending on how far he or she travels. Furthermore, transit use saves more than 855 million gallons of gasoline every year. The American Public Transportation Association predicts that if Americans used public transportation for roughly ten percent of daily travel needs, the United States would reduce its dependence on oil imported from the Persian Gulf by more than 40 percent.

But there are also significant community benefits to mass transit such as reduced traffic congestion, more livable communities, more educational and job opportunities, increased economic development, and a cleaner environment. The American Public Transportation Association estimates that every \$1 invested in public transportation projects generates from \$4 to \$9 in local economic activity.

So while the idea is exciting, more interest needs to be shown from the citizens in Kershaw County to move this idea of commuter rail forward. Despite its many virtues, a commuter rail is a large commitment that will require substantial and ongoing support to justify its implementation.

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