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Put transit bond on the ballot

Deseret Morning News editorial

Of all the things that would require a tax increase in Salt Lake County, it would be hard to find one more popular than TRAX, the light-rail system that was launched amid skepticism but now has many cities clamoring to be next in line for an extension. Next week, the County Council will deliberate whether to put a bond proposal on the ballot launching four new lines quickly. They should put it there, even though the price tag may cause a few double-takes.

The owner of a \$200,000 house, which qualifies as a small starter home in today's market, would see a property tax hike of about \$95 a year if the bond, estimated at nearly \$900 million, passes. That's considerable. It may be more palatable to raise the money through sales taxes, which would take legislative approval. But the Utah Transit Authority deserves at least a chance to make the argument for such a thing, and the people of the many communities that would benefit deserve a say, as well.

It's worth remembering that a Deseret Morning News/KSL-TV poll earlier this year found that 61 percent of respondents said they would support a property tax hike for TRAX lines to Draper, West Valley City, the Salt Lake City International Airport and South Jordan. The same poll found that 92 percent want the TRAX bond on the ballot this fall.

The County Council also is considering several other bond items for November. These include \$30 million for open space preservation, \$63.5 million for recreational facilities and \$34 million for the Living Planet Aquarium. A \$35 million bond for a soccer stadium also may be considered, especially if all other funding proposals for such a thing fall apart.

With the exception of open space preservation, none of these are as important as the need for expanded transit.

County leaders cannot ignore the fact that Utahns already bear the fourth largest state and local tax burden in the nation, according to a recent survey by the Utah Taxpayers Association. As we said in an earlier editorial, a heavy tax burden can hurt economic development. However, a strong transportation system that includes light and heavy rail, as well as an efficient highway network, would be a huge boon to economic development, as well as to the efficient flow of commerce.

This is especially important as the nation deals with rising fuel costs. At the very least, the county needs to let voters make their own decision on this matter.

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