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Session on transit put on back burner

By Nicole Warburton and Lisa Riley Roche

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Utah lawmakers say a special session next week to debate a \$1.8 billion sales-tax hike for transit isn't happening.

"There just does not seem to be the impetus to have it done," House Speaker Greg Curtis, R-Sandy, said Tuesday.

That means plans to fund a massive expansion of transit along the Wasatch Front may not happen this year, depending on whether the Salt Lake County Council approves a \$895 million property-tax hike to build four new TRAX lines in the county.

Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. still has no interest in calling a special session to consider the transportation proposal. "It will have to happen at some point during the next year," Huntsman said Tuesday.

"However, there are no plans in the short term to call a special session."

It's a decision the governor expects will stick. "I haven't seen or heard anything that would change my mind in the short term," he said, adding that he still believes the issue is important enough to take to voters at some point in the future.

When asked about the apparent "no" from lawmakers and the governor, Utah business leaders said Tuesday that their push for a special session is not dead. Lane Beattie, president of the Salt Lake Chamber of Commerce, said he was hopeful that lawmakers would change their stance once presented with more information.

The chamber first called for a special session last month. It wants lawmakers to authorize four counties — Davis, Weber, Salt Lake and Utah — to put a question on the November ballot asking residents to raise the sales tax dedicated to transportation to 1 percent. The money would fund expansion of commuter rail and light rail, construction of bus rapid transit lines and reconstruction of some highways.

Next Wednesday is not the ultimate deadline for a special session. The chamber still has 10 to 14 days to convince the governor to call a special session to give

counties authorization to raise the sales-tax rate, said Keith Rattie, president and CEO of Questar, and chair of the Chamber's board of governors.

Still, it will be a tough sell, he said.

"We probably have a lot of work to do and not much time to accomplish it to overcome the doubts about the merits of the special session," Rattie said. "I think we still have some hope that we'll get support for the special session. If we don't — while we think there are adverse consequences of waiting — we will as a business community, step back, regroup and focus our attention on the 2007 legislative session."

If lawmakers were to approve a transit funding package during the general session, it would cost the state two years and millions in construction fees, according to Beattie. Utah could also lose out on millions in federal funding, he said.

Senate President John Valentine, R-Orem said Tuesday he has yet to see the facts to back that assertion. The Utah Taxpayers Association said the chamber has yet to show that building light rail is "the most cost-effective way of reducing congestion."

"Spending local tax dollars to get federal dollars doesn't make sense if the project is fundamentally flawed," said Mike Jerman with the taxpayers association.

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