



deseretnews.com

Deseret Morning News, Sunday, August 06, 2006

Can counties harmonize rail systems?

By [Jay Evensen](#)

Deseret Morning News

Did you like the Alaskan bridge to nowhere? Then you'll love Utah County's railroad to nowhere.

If the stars align just right over the next few months, that could become a reality. And it's all because several different governments are working on essentially the same problem. It's as if a committee were assigned to write a masterpiece and someone forgot to assign the bass clef notes.

Actually, the committee is spread across two counties, with each operating independently of the other, and one of them might get too tired to write the bass clef.

Utah County voters will have an opportunity in November to approve a quarter-cent increase in their sales-tax rate to fund, at long last, a commuter-rail system originating in Provo. This is the southern leg of FrontRunner, the commuter rail line that eventually will connect southern Utah County with Brigham City, and all points between.

If voters say yes, this will fund a rail line that goes up to the border with Salt Lake County. The only problem is Salt Lake County has yet to find money to connect those tracks from the border up to Salt Lake City. All the focus, and all the funding, so far has been on the first phase of FrontRunner, which will go from Salt Lake City north.

In the meantime, voters in Salt Lake County face a ballot in November that is loaded with opportunities to raise their own taxes. Chief among these is an \$895 million bond that would jump-start new TRAX lines to Draper, South Jordan, West Valley City and the Salt Lake City International Airport. They also will face bonding measures that would save valuable open spaces from development and fund certain zoo, arts and parks projects.

This is where the exhaustion part comes in. All of those measures, if approved, would add \$133 per year to the property tax bill of someone who owns a house valued at \$200,000, which means a lot of you would pay even more. After all that, would those same voters want to add even more taxes to connect to those

tracks at the Utah County line? Or would they tell all those train riders from Provo to just get off at the border and walk?

Where is the inter-county love? Or does love mean never having to say I'm raising my taxes to help you?

To the casual observers, all of this must seem incredibly complicated, not to mention contradictory. On the one hand, we are bombarded by news stories telling us that Utah's economy never had it so good. The state is running a record surplus — \$351 million at the end of the last fiscal year — and the governor and state lawmakers are considering a huge income tax cut. On the other hand, local governments are asking people to raise taxes like never before in order to fund long-neglected and important projects.

Will the state tax cuts cancel out the local tax hikes? Don't count on it.

Which brings us back to the idea of writing a masterpiece by committee. When several governments look at parts of the same problem, they tend to see things only in terms of how they, themselves, will be remembered. State lawmakers generally don't ever want to be associated with raising taxes in any way, especially in times of plenty. Local leaders aren't thrilled with the idea, either, but they often face more practical matters, and light rail is popular.

The awful truth, however, is that there is only one type of taxpayer, and that's you, dear reader. You pay local, state and federal taxes. You fund it all. And you're paying for more and more. A newly released Heritage Foundation report from Washington said the federal tax burden is rising, even with the Bush tax cuts. **A local study by the Utah Taxpayers Association said Utahns have the fourth largest local and state tax burden in the nation.**

To be clear, I strongly support both light rail and commuter rail. But I'm guessing voters would be more confident about raising taxes if state leaders would step up and coordinate this masterpiece so that it gets done efficiently, and in one piece.

Jay Evensen is editor of the Deseret Morning News editorial page. E-mail: even@desnews.com
