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## Transit loses in session

### Deseret Morning News editorial

The personal income tax cut approved in Tuesday's special session was a foregone conclusion. Some \$70 million was already off the table for tax-cutting purposes and could not be appropriated elsewhere. Lawmakers also created a two-track system that allows taxpayers to pick between a flat 5.35 percent tax rate with no deductions or a higher rate with many customary deductions. The accompanying rebracketing will save families about \$50 starting in the 2007 filing season.

The funding of transit, however, was far from a sure thing. Instead of a slight increase to the state sales tax, which would have provided funding for a wide variety of transportation projects — light rail, commuter rail and highways, lawmakers went with a local-option model. County commissioners can place the issue on the Nov. 7 ballot. The decision provided Salt Lake County with an alternative to raising property taxes an estimated \$900 million for light-rail expansion.

A sales tax is preferable to such a large hike in property taxes, so give lawmakers their due on that front. But why not bite the bullet and seek the tax increase statewide, so that much needed transportation projects such as commuter rail, highway improvements and TRAX extensions could be expedited?

Perhaps lawmakers didn't want to be saddled with enabling voters to increase the state sales tax while lawmakers were approving a cut in personal income taxes. The Utah Taxpayers Association estimates the sales tax increase and the income tax hike will be a wash for taxpayers in counties that approve the sales tax. Admittedly, it's a little wishy-washy to, on the one hand, lower the sales tax rate on food statewide only to create a mechanism to increase sale taxes for transit.

Lawmakers rationalized that since 40 percent of Utahns live in Salt Lake County, local officials should decide for themselves what local projects should have priority.

That makes sense on some levels, but there is also something to be said for moving up the time line on transportation projects statewide. Commuter rail isn't

as much of a priority in Salt Lake County as TRAX extensions. It's more critical to residents of Utah, Davis and Weber counties. They need to step up and commit the funds for this much-needed transportation option.

Salt Lake County residents must likewise make an investment in their transportation future because lawmakers, in an election year, prefer to cut taxes rather than authorize tax hikes.

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