



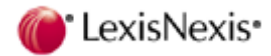
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## Public Transit on Front Burner

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As commuters increasingly turn to bus and rail lines because of soaring gasoline prices, public transit, long the poor relation of American travel, is finally getting respect -- and money.



In an effort to make riding bus and rail lines even more appealing, the House on Thursday moved to provide \$1.7 billion to help transit agencies pay higher fuel costs, limit fare hikes and expand service. California would receive about \$266 million.

That's on top of a record \$10 billion -- a \$1-billion increase -- a congressional committee recently recommended for expanding transit nationwide in the next year. A bipartisan measure also has been introduced to expand tax credits to encourage more workers to ride public transit.

"Americans are flocking onto mass transit at rates not seen in half a century in the United States," said Rep. Peter A. DeFazio (D-Ore.).

The new appreciation for the services comes as politically anxious lawmakers have scrambled for ways to respond to high gas prices.

But as they head home for the July 4 recess, a number of representatives are worried about facing voters without a better record on energy.

Although the transit measure passed overwhelmingly, on a 322-98 vote, some Republican lawmakers ridiculed it as a poor substitute for expanded domestic oil drilling.

Rep. Frank D. Lucas (R-Okla.) complained that his constituents not only must pay higher gas prices, "but now they have to subsidize people in big cities with the luxury of access to public transportation."

Last year, public transit recorded its highest number of trips in 50 years. During the first quarter of this year, ridership on light-rail lines rose 10% while vehicle-miles traveled on the nation's roads declined 2.3%.

"We're loving our transit systems to death," DeFazio said, noting that higher fuel costs and increased demand for service are straining budgets of transit agencies.

In the Los Angeles region, average weekday ridership on Metrolink is up about 12% this month from June 2007. The commuter train service's fuel costs, which have increased from 5% of its operating budget to 13%, contributed to a fare increase that goes into effect Tuesday.

Ridership on L.A.'s Metro Rail system was up 6% last month from May 2007. The bill would provide

the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority with \$45 million a year over two years.

The Orange County Transportation Authority reported that ridership on express buses between Orange County, Riverside and Los Angeles counties was up 19% in the first quarter of the year compared with the same period a year ago.

Support for public transit, long regarded as secondary to highway funding, comes as Congress appears poised to reject President Bush's effort to take money from mass transit to help erase a projected deficit in the federal highway trust fund.

Still, public transit faces threats. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has proposed steering \$828 million in gasoline sales tax revenue away from transit assistance to help patch the state's \$15.2-billion budget gap.

The money promised by the House bill passed Thursday is still in the offing. The Senate has yet to act. The Bush administration opposed the bill but stopped short of threatening a veto.

The White House budget office expressed concern that under the measure, "transit operators risk becoming permanently reliant upon this type of assistance."

If the bill becomes law, money would still have to be formally appropriated.

The measure would also increase the federal share of money to transit agencies to build parking facilities at the end of subway lines and to buy alternative-fuel buses.

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