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Coast RTA essential; libraries not so much

By Robert M. Clinger

Horry County Council's failure to pass an amendment to its budget to provide \$400,000 in emergency funding for Coast RTA will deprive hundreds, possibly thousands, of riders who have depended on the public transportation system as an effective means to get them to their jobs, doctors' appointments, adult day care, shopping, etc. The four councilmen whose votes defeated the measure put another nail in public transportation's coffin here in Horry County. In the absence of a white knight, Coast RTAs services will be dramatically cut in January.

To those taxpayers who have depended on Coast RTA - the disabled, the elderly, those without the economic means to own a vehicle - there is no economically viable transportation alternative once The Coast's services are cut back even further. But the displaced riders can take comfort in knowing that County Council is spending millions of dollars on new libraries throughout the county over the next few years (even though there is no money in the budget to fund future operations of these projects) for residents. Unfortunately, without Coast RTA's services, many may never be able to utilize these public libraries.

To be sure, most public services do not financially sustain themselves. Public transportation, like libraries and recreation facilities, is subsidized by local government / the taxpayers. While Horry County Council did earmark a portion of the anticipated revenues from taxes on the casino boat operations for The Coast in resolutions earlier this year, this was merely an exercise in futility. There was no doubt that the casino boat operators would challenge the constitutionality of taxing their gross wagers, which take place in international waters outside the authority of the state of South Carolina and Horry County. These lawsuits will take years to settle and could ultimately go to the Supreme Court. During this time, the casino boat operators are getting virtually a tax-free ride. If council does not renegotiate a boarding fee regime, Horry County will never see any money from the casino boats other than property taxes. That is the simple fact. In the absence of renegotiating a boarding fee, the council should support Chairwoman Liz Gilland in her efforts to ensure a permanent and secure source of funds for public transportation.

In addition, the council should begin to explore a long-term public transportation infrastructure that utilizes public-private partnerships. If this area is to be a world-class destination for visitors and residents, consideration must be given to a world class public transportation system. A monorail system has been discussed in the past and should be reconsidered as a means of connecting residents and visitors to the airport, Coastal Carolina University, the county seat, Broadway at the Beach, the Hard Rock Park, etc. A project of this magnitude would be extremely capital intensive, thus making a public-private partnership the only way to ensure the project's successful development and operation. Such public-private partnerships have helped projects such as the Las Vegas Monorail, the Hiawatha Light Rail Transit in Minneapolis, and the Hudson-Bergen Light Rail come to fruition. But such a project is what dreams are made of and would be years away. In the meantime, residents need Coast RTA. Funding public transportation is in the best interests of the people and is consistent with the outlook for the future of Horry County. And while many may challenge the financial responsibility of public transportation, it is economically responsible, as it helps to ensure many taxpayers are able to get to work to make a living, to go shopping, etc. Funding The Coast RTA is a necessity.

For those councilmen who doubt the benefit of public transportation, I challenge them to do without their own vehicles for one week and try to get around this county. This would be a very eye-opening experience for them, and perhaps they would understand how vital this service really is to Horry County and its residents. Perhaps if the four councilmen who blocked funding had to walk to the next council meeting, they would be more supportive of this project.

The writer, a candidate for Horry County Council District 2 in 2006, lives in Myrtle Beach.

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