

Is there a better way to get there?

By Larry Cohen, Executive Director of the Prevention Institute, Oakland
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You rightly point President-elect Barack Obama toward an investment in clean air, green jobs and less dependency on oil. But there's more: mass transit will protect the public's health.

Besides the obvious benefits of a cleaner environment with fewer toxins and greenhouse gases, mass transit means people will walk and bike more. We can also expect fewer injuries and deaths from car crashes. And the jobs that would be created also benefit the public's health; steady employment means steady income, and for many, health care coverage.

Public transit is indeed the multiplier effect we've been waiting for: a good solution that solves multiple problems.

Original article, "A Pitch for Mass Transit"

Editorial

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One way he can do this is to give mass transit — trains, buses, commuter rails — the priority it deserves and the full financial and technological help it needs and has long been denied.

Mass transit has always played second fiddle to the automobile, so Mr. Obama will need strong allies. Ray LaHood, Mr. Obama's choice for transportation secretary, must be not only an ally but a champion for mass transit. Mr. LaHood is a Republican and former member of Congress from rural Illinois, where farmers produce a lot of ethanol and where people mostly drive. His résumé on transportation issues is thin, and we fear he may need some coaxing in this new direction.

Another important ally should be — and almost certainly will be — James Oberstar, a Minnesota Democrat who is chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

For years, the division of transportation money in Washington has heavily favored cars and trucks — more than 80 percent of the big transit money from gas taxes goes to highways and bridges, and less than 20 percent to railroads or mass transit. Mr. Oberstar is leading the charge to change that formula and divide this money a little more evenly. This will not be easy. Automobiles will be with us a long time, and old spending habits die hard. But as part of the stimulus package now under discussion for transportation, Mr. Oberstar is proposing \$30 billion for highways and bridges and \$12 billion for public transit. That is certainly a far healthier mix.

The new administration could further help mass transit by shelving the unfair "cost effectiveness index" that President Bush put in place several years ago for new transit

programs. The net effect of this index was to make it easier to build highways and almost impossible to use federal money for buses, streetcars, light rail, trolleys — indeed, any commuter-rail projects.

For Mr. Obama's transit agenda and for Mr. LaHood, the next big challenge will be a transit bill that Congress must pass by September. Mr. LaHood is widely praised for his management skills and his ability to work well with others. Those abilities will certainly be needed if he and the Congress are to find and then finance the best, the most-efficient and the most-advanced ways for Americans to move around.