

Light-Rail Cash Is Assured - But How Fast Will It Come?

Lee Davidson

The Deseret News. Salt Lake City, Utah: May 22, 1996. pg. A.1.

Copyright The Deseret News May 22, 1996

A smiling Gov. Mike Leavitt said he obtained promises Tuesday that should ensure needed federal funding for Salt Lake County's proposed light-rail train system - and the reconstruction of the congested I-15 that he says hinges on it.

A big question still remaining, however, is exactly how fast that funding will come - and whether it will be quick enough to make the light-rail project viable. Still, the news was a vast improvement over last week when the House approved a non-binding budget resolution that included funding such projects at no better than a 50-50, federal-local cost share.

Utah officials say they need at least an 80-20 federal-local split to afford light rail without increasing local taxes - which voters rejected in a referendum.

Despite that House action last week, Leavitt and Rep. Jim Hansen, R-Utah, were told Tuesday by House Appropriations Subcommittee on Transportation Chairman Frank Wolf, R-Va., that he will honor an 80-20 cost split on Utah light rail.

The Clinton administration and the Senate previously have agreed to such a split, but House opposition threatened it.

"The question now is how long will it take to be funded, and will the project be viable under those conditions," Leavitt said.

He illustrated by saying, "Here's a glass. You've got to fill it up. They say they will put 80 percent of the water in that glass. Whether it will be a drop a year or poured in with a pitcher over a short time is the unknown."

He said if funding is spread out over too many years, the project would not be viable. And he noted that Wolf said not enough money is available to fully fund all the requests his committee has received.

But he said that Wolf agreeing to an 80-20 split could allow the Utah Transit Authority to borrow money up front to quickly build the system and later be reimbursed by the federal government over time as funding permits.

"The interest on that would be an expense of the project, so the federal government would pay 80 percent of the interest. That is (one reason) why this is so significant," Leavitt said.

But Hansen said the situation still makes him nervous. He points out that party control, chairmanships and funding priorities could all change before light rail is completed - so the promises made are still precarious.

Leavitt and Sen. Bob Bennett, R-Utah, also met Tuesday with the chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee - Sen. Mark Hatfield, R-Ore. - who also gave them good news.

They said Hatfield - who has been pushing an Oregon light-rail system - firmly supported an 80-20 split in Utah and relatively high funding for the first year of planned construction in 1997.

Leavitt requested \$58 million in first year funds or \$23 million more than the \$35 million the Clinton administration included in its proposed budget.

Bennett reported that Hatfield said, "I don't think we can go the full \$23 million." But

Bennett added, "I think that's a pretty good indication that the \$35 million the president asked for is in the ballpark. I think we would be very pleased with that."

Bennett and Leavitt said one reason light rail is so important is that planned reconstruction of I-15 could not proceed without it.

Without it, "You have to start all over again," Bennett said - noting that the I-15 reconstruction requires a clean air permit that in turn requires a mass transit component to reduce pollution during construction.

Leavitt said, "This is a little focused-on fact: If we had all the money in the bank for I-15 improvements, we couldn't do it without our air plan in place. Without light rail or some public transit component, we don't build roads."

He added, "My biggest priority now is to build and expand roads to relieve congestion. We can't do that unless we are able to solve that problem."

Leavitt also said that Salt Lake City hosting the 2002 Olympics is helping in the battle for I-15 and light-rail funds.

"For example, Congressman Wolf indicated a desire to put specific language in the (1997 transportation appropriations) bill related to the Olympics that would be helpful to us," he said.