

Indianapolis Star Editorial

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Don't let pump-price dive derail transit progress

Our position: *Despite drop in gas prices, region shouldn't lose momentum for mass transit.*

Remember the bad old days when gas had soared past \$4 a gallon and Americans were so desperate that many began taking the bus or train to work? Back in that dark and distant age -- of August -- when the nation's energy policy sat atop the agendas of politicians and pundits alike, a consensus was emerging that Central Indiana was finally ready to embrace mass transit, including light rail and a functional regional bus system.

Well, three months later, the economy has cratered, gas prices have plunged and the immediate pressure to move forward on transit appears to have waned.

But it would be a drastic mistake if Central Indiana leaders were to allow what almost certainly will be a short-term drop in energy costs to derail the momentum for regional transit.

In a My View today on the facing page, Christopher Leinberger, a fellow with the Brookings Institution and the keynote speaker at a Keep Indianapolis Beautiful banquet last week, makes the case that mass transit is an indispensable piece of building modern urban neighborhoods that promote a high quality of life. Leinberger offers the plausible argument that young professionals, an attractive demographic for growing industries, expect cities to provide workable bus and rail lines.

Unfortunately, Indianapolis cannot claim either asset. Commuter rail remains in the planning stages. And the city bus service is an underfunded underperformer.

Creating a functional transit system will be undeniably expensive. Just as building streets and highways, sports arenas, sewer systems, libraries and airport terminals has been expensive. Yet, in adding each of those cornerstones to the urban infrastructure, the community has found sustainable and often creative means for raising the necessary cash. The same can be done with transit.

What must be summoned is the political fortitude to take on an issue that until recently languished between "some day" and "never will."

That push could come from Mayor Greg Ballard, soon to complete the first year of a first term and still in search of an issue that will define his tenure. Or from Gov. Mitch Daniels, a popular and secure second-term leader who has shown a knack for finding creative solutions to intractable challenges.

The move to mass transit must not gain or lose momentum based on fluctuations in the price of gasoline. The long-term trend is clear: Central Indiana either moves forward with regional transit or gets left behind by other metro areas that have embraced modern means to handle growth and development.

