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Guest: Cut King County Metro costs after Prop. 1 failure

Instead of better budget management, finding ways to preserve service and making the bus system more efficient, elected officials are seeking higher taxes yet again, writes guest columnist Bob Pishue.

by Bob Pishue, Director, WPC Coles Center for Transportation
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FOR several months now, King County Executive Dow Constantine, Metropolitan King County Council member Larry Phillips and other county leaders have told the public they would cut neighborhood bus service by 16 percent if they did not receive the regressive tax increases they sought from the Proposition 1 ballot measure, which failed.

“It’s either bus cuts or this” increase to the sales tax and car-tabs, said Councilmember Phillips before the vote. Their planned cuts fall hardest on low-income families in neighborhoods across the county, according to a Seattle Times news story.

Instead of better budget management, finding ways to preserve service and making the bus system more efficient, elected officials are seeking higher taxes yet again. County leaders want Olympia to pass a statewide transportation package that would allow them to impose the unpopular motor vehicle excise tax.

Seattle Mayor Ed Murray recently announced a plan to increase car tab fees by \$60 and increase the sales tax by 0.1 percent, to 9.6 percent in Seattle. Even though Proposition 1 passed overwhelmingly (by 66 percent) in Seattle, any tax proposal for Metro Transit could suffer a similar fate as Proposition 1, because of the same false choice it would present to voters.

The false choice presented to voters by Proposition 1 was that a yes vote would have forced people to pay more for the same level of bus service, while a no vote would bring neighborhood bus-service

cuts by county leaders. It was a lose-lose that didn’t allow for constructive alternatives to keep buses on the road without raising regressive taxes on the public.

Improving budget management is often opposed by powerful unions and other interest groups. Managing budgets and implementing efficiencies create trade-offs making political life difficult for elected officials. But in this case, there are positive alternatives that allow King County leaders to call a timeout in their plans to cut bus service.

The good news is Metro’s financial outlook continues to improve. Without Proposition 1, Metro is receiving a \$32 million sales-tax windfall above previous estimates for 2014. Rising revenues allows King County leaders, if they choose, to stop most of their planned service cuts. To avoid cutting bus service altogether, officials need to save an additional \$28 million, less than 3 percent of the transportation budget for the entire county.

County leaders have the opportunity to avoid service cuts without raising taxes. Transit agencies are often locked into long-term labor contracts that lack flexibility. In December, however, Metro’s largest union, the Amalgamated Transit Union Local 587, rejected a generous offer and is currently working without a contract. Opening a dialogue could provide management and labor a chance to work together to protect neighborhood bus service.

The Municipal League identified six recommendations for Metro officials

to improve their operations without asking for more tax money. These recommendations include creative measures King County could implement to augment revenue and avoid imposing higher taxes.

The County Council could also review the large capital budget for savings. Metro is spending \$338 million this year on capital expenditures, mostly to buy new buses. Officials say they are spending \$65 million more than planned on new buses. Cost overruns exert pressure on the operating budget and hinder Metro’s ability to provide reliable bus service in our communities.

As Metro’s general manager described to citizens during what many called “The Kevin Desmond Misery Tour,” these cuts would slash the “meat and muscle” of neighborhood bus service, according to a PubliCola story.

Councilmember Phillips noted in a Ballard News-Tribune guest column that the planned cuts would fall hardest on “those with no other options — people working low-wage jobs — often at odd hours, people with disabilities, students, and the elderly.”

King County leaders should work to protect the mobility of the county’s most vulnerable residents. A good-faith effort includes considering all options before cutting services. Managing a large urban transit agency is hard work, but life gets even harder for all of us when government officials take away our neighborhood bus service.