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CEO UpDate

Clear Successes in 2007; Outlook for Project Funding from State Grows Dark



CEO Roger Snoble

By CEO ROGER SNOBLE

I would like to begin my column by thanking Bill Heard for his 15 years at Metro and, specifically, for his help in creating my monthly column. Bill was a driving force behind the 35 uninterrupted columns we did together, and I would like to wish him a happy retirement. I'll miss working with him.

I would like to look back and look forward in this last column of the year, beginning with some of our successes in 2007. I'm very proud that ridership has held together well, even with the fare changes. It appears ridership was less affected by our new fares as some predicted. Rail ridership particularly has been doing extremely well.

I'm also proud of our efforts to continue improving the quality of our bus and rail services, and I believe this improvement is one reason our ridership remained strong. Although we did not have any big openings this year, we continued to improve our facilities. We added a lot more of the big articulated buses, and we have them running on Rapid and local service.

We're working away on the Eastside Extension and that's going very well. It has about another 18 months before completion. The project's safety record has been absolutely outstanding. I'm proud of all the people working on it, including our contractors.

Also, for the first time since I've been CEO, we had a pretty decent budget year. We have enough money and most everything in the budget is positive. We are starting to see some softening of the sales tax. That's certainly out there. Still, for meeting our budget projections we'll be in good shape. We won't have the usual spillover funds from the sales tax, but we're in a little better shape than other local governments going into the 2008 budget year.

Another thing that went well this year was the Call for Projects, especially considering we had to postpone the last two. The Call for Projects involves Metro providing a lot of money going to a lot of places—primarily money for cities and county projects. A lot of those projects allow us to have the Rapid buses and the bus transponders. These smaller projects, such as adding turning lanes and synchronizing lights, can make a big change in the ability of traffic to move. And, of

course, the better the traffic moves the better the buses move.

It's not always easy handing out money. It starts fights at times. So the fact that our people really know how to manage the Call for Projects will improve things a lot.

Next year will present challenges in state funding. What's really a shame about that is the state came up with the Traffic Congestion Relief Program (TCRP) seven or eight years ago to jump start transit projects in urban areas. And we've used that money very well. We've used it on the Orange Line, on the Gold Line Eastside Extension, on the Rapid lines and part of the Expo Line. If you look back at our big successes, that money had a lot to do with those projects. The problem now is those funds are no longer around, and other state funding has evaporated too, given shape of the state budget.

In fact, we'll be lucky to have any money at all from the state in 2008. They're going to do everything they can do to take transportation money and divert it to the state deficit. Sacramento did it this budget year; it's going to be worse for them next year, so I don't think there is hope for us getting anything out of the state—even though they were supposed to make changes last time. How many times have we voted to protect those moneys and the state still finds ways to go get those moneys?

Basically, if we don't find a new revenue source, we're not going to be build any more projects, after what we have going now; that even includes the extension of Expo. Or if we do get any of those built, they are going to be way out in the future because we have to wait for the money to accumulate. So it's critical for us to find some new way to fund these projects. They are needed. The situation's not going to get better by itself.

There was one good thing that happened in this budget year. Speaker Nunez got a better split of the State Transportation Improvement Program money we do get. Certainly over the long haul that will help us.

So we'll have challenges next year, but we've shown we can meet challenges.

I wish all of you a happy and successful 2008.

December 28, 2007