

Editorial: Natural allies watch as transit gets beaten up

If environmentalists remain on sidelines, public transportation will continue to lose

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Politically speaking, transit in California is the equivalent of the little kid who always gets picked on by the schoolyard bully. This year at state budget time, the bully -- let's call him Arnold -- had no trouble stealing transit's lunch money. He diverted some \$1.3 billion in gas taxes that had been slated to go to local bus and rail operators was diverted to help paper over the state's deficit instead.

The top leaders in the Legislature, Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata from Oakland and Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez from Los Angeles, both represent urban areas. Each has thousands of constituents who depend on transit. Buses and trains in their communities are overflowing. Both leaders opposed transit cuts initially but, in the end, both voted for them.

Newspapers wrote editorials bemoaning transit cuts, but it didn't matter. Transit's pockets were easy to pick, and they were.

It is clear that transit riders are woefully overmatched in the fierce competition for shrinking state dollars. Transit leaders have not made a persuasive case to the Legislature that their customers matter. In part that's because many of the people who depend on transit are poor. In part that's because as a group, transit users are powerless and unorganized.

But in large part transit's weakness reflects the lack of support from an interest group that is powerful and organized: California's environmental community. Environmentalists are transit's natural allies. Or at least they should be. Yet during the budget fight this year, environmental groups sat on the sidelines and watched transit get beaten up.

The environmental lobby should be ashamed of this lapse. Its members should also be concerned that it adds to the image of environmentalists as elitists, a special interest that cares more about securing tax breaks for people who can afford to buy hybrid cars than securing a decent mass transit system for the millions in this state who depend on public transit to get to work, to school or a doctor's appointment.

At a time highway congestion is growing, gas prices are soaring and global warming has become an international concern, transit ought to be an environmental priority in California. Instead, in the wake of the governor's budget cuts, transit operators up and down the state are drawing up plans to cut service and raise fares.

The governor made a calculated political decision -- shift transit money to help pay for other priorities. Environmentalists gave the governor a pass. Majority Democrats in the Legislature fumed for a while, but in the end they went along with no apparent political consequences.

This will happen again if transit riders don't get organized. They need to do what nurses and prison guards did a few years ago -- meet the governor at every campaign appearance and remind him that they do matter. They need to forge alliances with environmentalists -- and environmentalists need to seek those alliances, too. They need to stand up and fight for their fair share of the public purse.

If transit riders don't do these things, they should get ready to stand by the side of the road and wait longer and longer for the bus to arrive. And California's environmental community should get ready to share the blame for the lack of progress on clean air and global warming.