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Fund would ease state traffic congestion

BY BRUCE SICELOFF, Staff Writer

WILMINGTON - Former state transportation secretary Sam Hunt called today for the creation of a congestion relief fund that would match local tax money with \$1.6 billion in state funds to help the Triangle, Triad and Charlotte regions pay for urban transit projects.

Hunt serves on a statewide study commission that is assembling a package of transportation funding proposals to be considered by the state legislature when it convenes in May. At today's meeting of the commission in Wilmington, he offered draft legislation that would authorize new local transit taxes in the state's major urban areas and would set up the Congestion Relief and Intermodal Transportation 21st Century Fund.

The fund would provide a total of \$1.909 billion to finance rail, port and public transportation projects over the next 12 years:

-- \$1.621 billion to cover up to 25 percent of capital costs for urban transit projects in the Triangle, Charlotte and Triad areas, with each region limited to 33 percent of the total

-- \$80 million in state aid for rail access to the state ports

- \$80 million for Class 1 freight railroads
- \$58 million for short-line freight railroads
- \$20 million for statewide bus grants to local governments
- \$20 million to expand intercity passenger train service

Hunt, of Burlington, chairs a transit, rail and ports panel of the statewide 21st Century Transportation Committee, which drafted the congestion-relief plan. The full committee is expected to ask the General Assembly this year to increase state highway and other transportation spending and to give local governments more transportation taxing options.

Hunt said he hoped his congestion plan would be included in the group's recommendations. He made no recommendations about how the state would finance the new fund. He noted that the full 21st Century committee is considering options that include state transportation bonds, a halt to the yearly transfer of \$172 million from the Highway Trust Fund to the General Fund, an increase in the highway use tax collected on car sales, and other tax and fee hikes.

Hunt's proposed legislation would give the three major urban areas two identical options for new or expanded taxes to help pay the local share of urban transit needs:

- a half-cent sales tax, now in effect in Mecklenburg County
- a vehicle registration fee, now levied in the Triangle, with the legal limit to be raised to \$7 from the current \$5.

In Wake, Durham and Orange counties, the local sales tax hike would require approval by voters, county commissioners and the Triangle Transit Authority. If two or three counties held their referendums at the same time, the combined votes in all counties would determine the outcome.

Wake and Durham voters combined their numbers in a similar way in the early 1980s, when they approved bonds for a second airport runway.

The urban grants could provide the state's share for a total of \$6.5 billion in transit projects by 2020. Hunt said that would provide the state's part of pending or proposed rail and bus improvements in the three urban areas.

Hunt's proposal won praise from Triangle transit advocates.

"If you look at total DOT spending annually, this is a good start, it represents about 4 percent of our total spending," said Nina Szlosberg of Raleigh, who serves on the state Board of Transportation. "It's a modest, reasoned approach, based on need."

David King, general manager of the TTA, said Triangle political and business leaders will be encouraged by Hunt's recommendations for state funding as they consider a proposal for more than \$2 billion in local transit projects by 2020.

"As far as we're concerned, this is an awfully good step," King said.

If the legislature doesn't find money for urban transit, rural areas eventually will suffer as well, Hunt said.

"The congestion and the growth in these urban areas is a reality that can't be ignored," Hunt said. "If we don't come up with money to answer these needs, then the rural areas can rest assured that their money will be transferred to those urban areas -- because that's where the people are and that's where you have a majority of the votes.

"So unless you come up with revenue to solve their problem, in the long run the rural areas will lose, too."

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