

Two Fresno Bee Editorials, September 18, 2002

## A full transit plate

City's new transportation director must hit the ground running.

In his job running the airport in Sarasota, Fla., Ronald "Noah" Lagos faced a major construction project that went over budget and missed deadlines. The airport was plagued by declining ridership and high fares. He'll get all of that and more -- including running the city's bus service -- in his new job as transportation director for the city of Fresno. But at least it won't rain on him as much.

Lagos comes well-recommended for his new post in Fresno. He will need all the skills he can muster in the new job. Fresno's long-awaited new airport concourse is still awaited -- a date in November is now expected for the grand opening of a facility that was supposed to open in February.

Lagos will also be asked to deal with Fresno's chronic problems of limited numbers of flights and high fares, which combine to cause many travelers in the region to drive to the Bay Area or Los Angeles to catch cheaper, more convenient flights. He will also oversee Fresno's vital, though often overlooked, downtown Chandler Field.

Another major task for Lagos will be overseeing and improving Fresno Area Express, or FAX, the city's bus service. The system suffers from inconvenient schedules, long travel times and fares that went up to \$1 per ride last year, an increase that prompted a precipitous slide in ridership, from 13 million trips to 11.8 million.

Lagos has no experience running a municipal bus system, but believes his airport experience will help him in both jobs. Travelers want the same things -- reliability, low fares and good service -- whether they travel by bus or plane.

Improving both air travel and bus service is crucial to Fresno's economic development. Businesses from outside the area look at elements such as convenient air travel -- along with schools, parks, libraries, housing, cultural affairs and entertainment opportunities -- when they seek locations for new or expanded operations. And Fresno's bus system is crucial for a couple of reasons: Many of Fresno's residents cannot easily afford to operate automobiles, **and the Valley's horrible air pollution problems require that we find ways to get people out of cars and into mass transit.** That latter need simply won't be possible to meet unless dramatic improvements are made to the city's bus service, in scheduling, speed and convenience.

There is also a perception problem that must be fought, that buses are somehow not good enough for those who can afford to drive the streets -- usually alone -- in their own cars. That isn't the case in other cities, where every socioeconomic class rides buses because they are convenient and often cheaper than a private vehicle. We need to get past that particular hang-up, and soon.

We hope Lagos is a man who relishes challenges, because he has his work cut out for him. But we all have a tremendous stake in his success, and as we welcome him to Fresno, we wish him the very best.

## Regional bus ride

There may be a better way to run bus systems in Fresno County.

The first tentative -- and welcome -- steps toward a regional bus system could be taken at a meeting Thursday of local transit system staffers and elected leaders. The details of such a

system, how it would work and who would run it, are daunting, but the idea is a compelling one and deserves a full debate.

Buses of various sorts cross paths in the metropolitan area and along the rural roads of the county every day, many of them running without full loads of passengers. Greater efficiencies and lower costs might well be achieved by merging the various systems into one. There is also a case to be made that a larger system might be better equipped to compete for state and federal transit dollars. There may also be opportunities for consolidation that fall short of full regionalization.

All that should be on the table at Thursday's meeting, organized by Fresno County's Council of Governments and pushed by county supervisors Bob Waterston and Susan Anderson, among others. These ideas have been percolating in informal meetings between city and county policy-makers for some time. Now let's see if something concrete can emerge.

It won't be easy. Fresno Area Express and Clovis Stagelines charge \$1 for regular fares; the riders of the Fresno County Rural Transit system pay only 50 cents (35 cents for seniors and children). Can a fare structure be constructed to fit the entire county?

Can the many thousands of schoolchildren who use buses be brought into a regional system?

Clovis and Fresno bus drivers are union members, and earn larger salaries and more extensive benefits than their county counterparts, who are not unionized. If the systems merge, would all drivers earn the higher salaries and benefits? That would have a big impact on the county budget.

Those are just some of the questions that would have to be answered. But the effort is worth it. Efficiency in the expenditure of public resources is always a virtue, and the increasingly harmful Valley air offers an even better reason to come up with ways to get more people out of cars and into mass transit.