

# Florio tells rally in D.C. the nation must shift priorities to mass transit

By GUY T. BAEHR

WASHINGTON—Gov. Jim Florio said yesterday the nation must change its transportation priorities to give more support to mass transit if it wants to clean up its air and reduce its dependence on foreign oil.

"We just got done fighting a very successful war in the Persian Gulf. The right lesson to take from that is that working together, we can accomplish difficult goals. The wrong lesson would be to think we can now sit back and stay hooked on oil," Florio said.

The Governor and the mayor of Houston spoke at a Capitol Hill rally organized by America's Coalition for Transit Now, a national lobbying coalition organized to seek greater federal support for mass transit.

About 60 people from New Jersey, including representatives of state transit and ridesharing groups, as well as the New Jersey Environmental Lobby, the United Cerebral Palsy Association of New Jersey and Hands Across New Jersey, the anti-tax group, rode a special train to Washington to take part in the pro-transit rally.

Florio, honorary co-chairman of the national group, called the lobbying event "part of an effort to bring some sanity to our nation's transportation policy," which he said is tilted heavily toward highway construction and against buses and trains.

He said federal spending for highways has increased 85 percent over the last decade while federal support for mass transit has been cut by almost 50 percent.

"We've got to change some priorities," Florio told more than 100 people at the rally.

He said President Bush's proposed five-year transportation funding bill "is more of the same. It means more highways for more cars and less support for mass transit."

Under Bush's bill, federal funding for highways, now five times the amount allocated for mass transit, would increase to eight times by 1996.

Florio said such an overemphasis on highway building jeopardizes the nation's future by increasing its dependence on cars, rather than supporting alternatives such as buses, trains, vanpools and carpools.

"We're not out to get rid of cars, but we think Ameri-

cans want to have a choice because it's been shown that where people do have a choice, more and more are leaving their cars home," he said.

Florio said increasing consumption of petroleum by autos is hurting the nation's economy because imported oil already accounts for 40 percent of the nation's trade deficit.

And, he said, "The more oil we consume, the more automobile exhaust emissions are produced to dirty our air. As you know, auto emissions are the largest source of air pollution."

Houston Mayor Kathy Whitmire, co-chairwoman of the year-old national coalition, said her city, the nation's fourth largest, doubled its bus ridership in the last decade and plans to begin building a network of trolley lines to ease traffic congestion.

But, she said, "The federal government has to be our partner. It's time for Congress to show some leadership and say we want an emphasis on public transit in our nation."

Whitmire said highways and cars are heavy consumers of two "nonrenewable resources—land and oil. It's time to note that one light rail line can carry as many people as an eight-lane highway, but it consumes far less land and oil."

Rep. Dean Gallo (R-11th Dist.) and Rep. Frank Pallone Jr. (D-3d Dist.) attended the rally.

Gallo said the administration's transportation policy "overlooks the importance of public transportation," while Pallone said that with the expiration of the nation's basic highway and mass transit funding legislation in October, "this is the year for us to do something big for public transit."

Earlier, Sen. Frank Lautenberg (D-N.J.) greeted the New Jersey delegation after it arrived in Washington following a three-hour train ride from Newark and Trenton.

Lautenberg called the administration's highway and mass transit funding proposal part of "a diabolical scheme" designed to use President Bush's post-war popularity to help continue a national policy of building more highways while providing less support for mass transit.

He said the bill "is seductive. It looks good if you don't look beyond the headlines. But it's not something we can live with," either in terms of clean air or dependence on foreign oil.



Gov. Florio chats with Renee Lane of West Orange, a mass transit supporter, after the rally at the U.S. Capitol. Photo by Marc Abraham.

One member of the delegation was Janet Coates of Ewing, state director of Hands Across New Jersey, the grassroots citizens group formed last year to oppose state tax increases sought by Florio.

Coates said the group is trying to broaden its scope by looking at problems "in a holistic manner, which is something that government has not done."

Backing mass transit over more highways makes sense, she said, "because dumping more and more tax money into roads isn't going to solve the problem."

Coates also said improved mass transit could help revitalize the state's cities, making them less of a drain on the state's taxpayers.

Dennis Tartaglia, director of planning for the United Cerebral Palsy Association of New Jersey, said he took part because many handicapped people who want to work cannot do so because accessible public transportation is not available. With Congress having mandated that bus and rail systems make themselves accessible to people with wheelchairs, he said, "we want to be sure they have the resources to provide adequate service."

Fred Brown, president of the New Jersey Environmental Lobby, said mass transit "is a very important concern of ours because of its impact on clean air. Getting people into electrified trains or clean buses is vastly better than to have every one of them in an individual car, especially if they're stuck in a traffic jam."