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Guest column

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LV's vast transit improvements

During most of my 28 years as a Clark County commissioner (1981-2009), it was my privilege to serve as chairman of the Regional Transportation Commission of Southern Nevada. From 1990 to 2010 the RTC and Clark County brought our community out of the dark ages of transportation, but much remains to be accomplished.

In 1990 the freeway network in the Las Vegas Valley was designed for a maximum population of 250,000, and we had no public mass transit system. Worse yet, we lacked the means to make any significant transportation improvements despite the tremendous growth we were experiencing. Local government and the RTC had only 4¢ per gallon of gasoline tax with which to build roads or add lanes to existing ones. There was no funding whatsoever for buses or any other form of public transit.

As a result of our 1990 transportation initiative, which was approved by the voters as Ballot Question 10, and another ballot measure in 2002, we have achieved a unique level of locally funded transportation funding, resulting in such improvements as the 215 Beltway, the Desert Inn Arterial, the RTC's award-winning bus system, a network of pedestrian bridges on the Strip and major road improvements in every part of the county, including the small towns and cities in outlying areas. We kept the promise I made in 1990 — that we would tear up every damn road in Southern Nevada within a few years. If we missed your street, let me know and I'll try to get it on the list.

Since leaving office, I have been able to stay involved in transportation issues in many roles, including as legal counsel-consultant for some major public and private projects, also as a member of the board of directors of the Nevada Highway Users Coalition, as chairman of the Advisory Committee for Frias Transportation Group and as a member of the board of the Las Vegas Monorail Co.

Since its inception several years ago, the monorail has been an important component to our transportation network in the resort corridor. Those of us who have lived in Southern Nevada for some time can clearly recall the pre-monorail days when we experienced repeated days of traffic gridlock along Para-

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dise Road and many nearby streets when we had a major convention at the Las Vegas Convention Center. That no longer occurs, thanks to the monorail.

The monorail has been a huge success in many ways. It is right at the top of the list among mass transit systems in the United States in terms of ridership per mile and farebox revenue per mile. It is one of the very few systems that actually makes an operating profit, which has amounted to several million dollars per year. Unlike other public systems, the monorail receives no taxpayer subsidy. Once the future plans to extend the monorail to the airport and other resorts are realized, it will be even more successful.

However, the monorail has never been able to meet its initial ridership projections and therefore has not been able to meet its full obligations to pay on the \$650 million in construction bonds. Recently, the monorail company decided to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection to restructure the debt on those bonds and to continue operating as usual. As we all know, numerous local companies have had to take this approach. If a successful plan emerges from the Chapter 11 proceedings, we can expect to see an improved monorail system become an essential part of a multimodal transportation network in the Las Vegas Valley. If no such plan is approved, the company may become unable to set aside the necessary funds to replace the trains and related equipment to continue to successfully operate in future years.

Las Vegas needs a successful monorail system to provide good transportation options for the resort corridor area and to help us relieve traffic congestion and improve air quality as well. If the system ceased to operate, we would surely feel the negative consequences in many ways.