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Governing and Managing Multi-Modal Transit Agencies in a Multicentric era

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**GOVERNING AND MANAGING
MULTI-MODAL REGIONAL
TRANSIT AGENCIES IN A
MULTICENTRIC ERA**

by
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and
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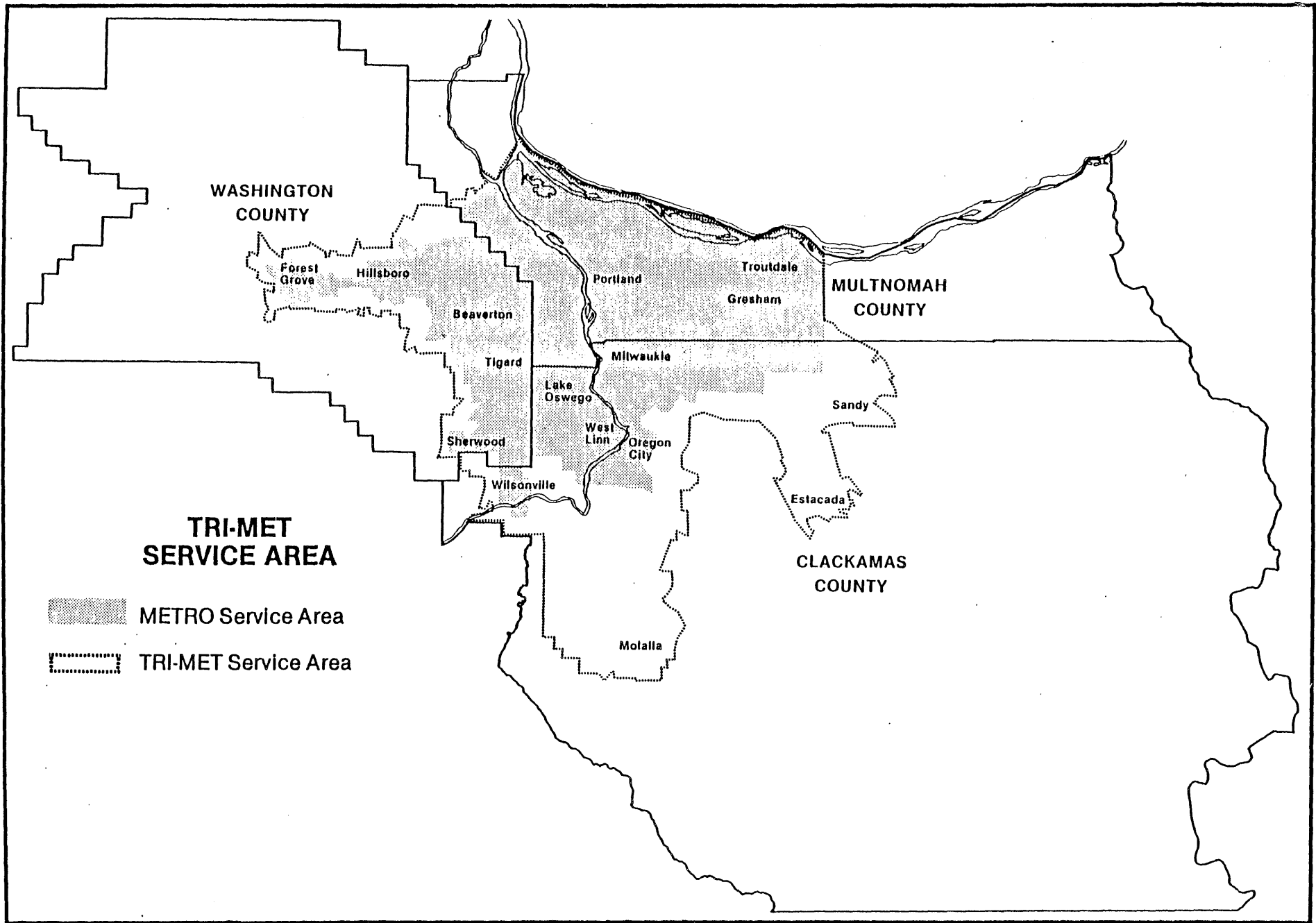
GOVERNING AND MANAGING MULTI-MODAL REGIONAL TRANSIT AGENCIES IN A MULTICENTRIC ERA

INTRODUCTION



We explore the dynamics of governing and managing multi-modal regional transit agencies through a case study of the Tri-County Metropolitan Transit District (Tri-Met), which provides bus and rail transit services to the Portland, Oregon, metropolitan area (see map). Along with other similarly constituted firms in the United States transit industry, Tri-Met confronts the challenge of providing service in a geopolitical context that is quite different than when the agency was created. The critical new element in Tri-Met's operating environment is the emergence of several suburban business centers that effectively compete with the Portland central business district (CBD), and are seeking transit investments that will facilitate locally-oriented economic growth.

{Figure About Here}

Tri-Met has predominantly supplied journey-to-work bus transit that radiated from downtown Portland throughout the metropolitan area, replicating the service configuration of the privately-owned companies it purchased in the early 1970s. The agency has demonstrated its continuing commitment to the CBD with a transit mall, as well as a free-fare zone for travel within downtown. In 1986 Tri-Met reinforced its downtown-orientation with a light rail transit (LRT) line that radiated eastward from the Portland CBD to a suburban business center 15 miles away. The agency is currently (1988) doing preliminary engineering for another LRT line radiating from downtown to the west. However, in recent years Tri-Met has also reconfigured the bus system in portions of its



**TRI-MET
SERVICE AREA**

-  METRO Service Area
-  TRI-MET Service Area

domain to more effectively provide service to some suburban business centers, and has altered its fare structure to boost suburban ridership.

The significance of this spatial complexity of interest in transit lies in both the political tensions it creates for Tri-Met and in better understanding how transit agencies are limited in their ability to simply manage efficiently their service delivery. Geopolitical conflict over the allocation of transit service and the type of service has important consequences for both the location of service and the ability to manage it. Burke (1979) in discussing the general capacity of transit to innovate observed that the local political context is important in understanding the "power setting" of transit agencies. Specifically, she suggests:

The power setting of local transit districts...varies enormously from area to area. In general, there has been a strong alliance between advocates of rail rapid transit (usually transit suppliers and consultants plus environmental or anti-highway groups) and downtown business interests. To the extent that the transit district seeks to build a rail system, these are usually their strongest supporters. (p. 29)

Hence, technological and service innovations spatially distribute benefits and costs that tend to support or confound existing spatial coalitions of interest (Smith 1987; Jones 1985).

An historical perspective on the transit industry is helpful in appreciating the significance of these alliances. Many of the street railway lines constructed during the heroic period of industry-building in the early years of the twentieth century were built by entrepreneurs who were primarily interested in profits on the sale and development of land they owned

along the rail right-of-way. Henry Huntington and his Pacific Electric Railway in the Los Angeles area, and F. M. "Borax" Smith and his Key System in the East Bay portion of the San Francisco Bay Area were two of the leading examples of integrated private sector transit-land development firms. When extraordinary construction costs necessitated by tunneling were involved, as in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, and San Francisco, local government financed the lines that would link CBDs with territories newly opened for settlement (Fogelson 1967; Adler 1980; Cheape 1980).

Transit lines built to facilitate land speculation were never very profitable. Governmental transit agencies were created to pick up the pieces of these enterprises as they failed, and to retool them for another round, this time primarily in support of CBD investors confronting intense suburban competition. The new governmental agencies absorbed the transit access costs of developing and redeveloping land. However, Tri-Met's experience indicates that absorbing transit access costs has reached political, as well as financial limits. Public-private partnerships, which recreate the integrated transit-land development firm through the auspices of the governmental agency, represent efforts to transcend these limits.

From an internal management perspective, Fielding (1987) observes:

Since it cannot control its environment or even change it in any meaningful way, transit management's best strategy is to come to understand the transit environment as fully as possible and make use of this knowledge wherever possible. To be *effective*, managers must respond to the demands of individuals and groups.

Because their agencies depend on the support of the communities they serve, transit

managers must ensure that transit service supports the economic, social, and environmental goals of these communities. However, transit managers can make their greatest contribution by being efficient -- that is, by supplying the desired services for the least amount of resources. To be both effective and efficient, managers must be ardent students of the social and political network in which they work. They need to realize that efficiency is under management's control, whereas service effectiveness is influenced by many factors in the environment that lie beyond management's ability to shape or restrain. (p. 7)

Our intent is to show that the geopolitical context of complex metropolitan areas extends not only to effectiveness issues but also efficiency, requiring management to structure institutional processes and service delivery arrangements accordingly. The results of this analysis will illustrate both the ways in which these impacts are felt in service delivery decisions and in the extent of impact on institutional and managerial processes of transit agencies.

We discuss four strategic responses to the new political context that Tri-Met's directors have pursued: (1) caution; (2) coverage; (3) diversification; and (4) shedding. Tri-Met has often turned inward, concentrating on internal matters, eschewing activism on potentially controversial regional transport issues. The agency has also sought to cover the district with services in order to generate and sustain widespread support. Tri-Met has also participated in efforts to distribute rail lines widely, and to design them so as to facilitate alliances between the CBD and important suburban competitors. Tri-Met directors have also explored providing suburban transit services that are different than the large vehicle-

based, fixed route, downtown-radial services the agency has traditionally provided. In addition, Tri-Met is attempting to diversify its sources of finance, entering into public-private partnerships of various sorts. Finally, Tri-Met has initiated efforts to shed some of its load, and encouraged others to help the agency to shrink. These strategies have often been tried in combination.

To facilitate and support the analysis, we analyze the creation of the agency, focusing on the structure of its governing board and its financing powers, in order to understand the consequences of these historical facts for the strategies that have evolved. We examine Tri-Met's existing investment in LRT and the planning process for future LRT lines, pursuing the ways in which transport technology choices - rail and bus - influence the relationship between the agency and its environment. We also explore how Tri-Met's planning, management, and budgeting in the new context strengthen tendencies to jurisdictional fragmentation. We conclude with a discussion of the relevance of our analysis for the ways in which transit industry leaders understand the challenges of the multicentric era and the choices available to them.

CREATING A GOVERNMENTAL TRANSIT AGENCY

In early November, 1968, the management of Rose City transit shut down the operation for two days, ignoring a Portland City Council ultimatum to either run the buses or forfeit its franchise (Adler 1986). Rose City was the last remaining privately-owned transit system, paying the lowest wages, of all major west coast properties. The transit workers had just rejected a company wage proposal, precipitating the management action. When an

agreement was reached granting drivers and mechanics modest wage increases, Rose City readied a fare hike request for the City Council. When the request came in early December, the Council voted instead to revoke Rose City's franchise in six months and take over the bus line. The Council reasoned that another fare hike would only exacerbate the process of ridership and service decline that had brought Rose City to its then debilitated condition. Portland political leaders hoped that municipal ownership would be an interim effort, giving way to a metropolitan-wide agency in the very near future. Rose City's jurisdiction was limited to the central city and a three-mile band beyond the city's boundary. Suburban-downtown radial service was provided by four small private companies, who were in similarly poor financial and service condition. Rose City had shown neither strategic nor financial interest in taking over these smaller suburban lines and consolidating them into a regional bus system. Reluctantly, Portland embarked on a process of creating a governmental transit agency, aiming at regionalization as well.

The Portland City Council created a Blue Ribbon Citizens Committee in December, 1968, to prepare a legislative agenda for the transition from private to public. The proposals developed for the state legislature by this group, and supported by the City, revealed quite clearly the City leadership's assessment of suburban political concerns. Anticipating opposition to its initiative, Portland leaders sought a transition process and an agency structure that would minimize suburban participation. Regarding the process of creating a transit district, the City supported legislation that would enable creation of a district by the governor. This action would follow receipt of a resolution adopted by the governing body of the most populous city in a metropolitan area finding that area-wide transportation needs were not being met by existing local transit operations. The governor would then appoint a

seven-member board of directors for the transit district. While the governor would endeavor to assure equitable board representation for all places in the district, the governor would have full discretion. Regarding finance, a district would have available to it a wide range of possible tax mechanisms, some of which could be adopted by the board of directors without a vote of the district electorate.

In opposition to the Portland initiative, a suburban coalition sponsored a legislative proposal that would enable creation of a multi-purpose regional agency, having sewage and solid waste, as well as transit responsibilities, rather than the single-purpose transit district Portland sought. Moreover, creation of such a regional agency would have to be approved by the electorate, along with its tax base. Its board of directors would be appointed by a convention of locally-elected officials, allocating board seats in a manner that advanced suburban interests.

Both proposals had grassroots support and the state legislature passed both. The Portland leadership was concerned that the transit issue, the one that was most pressing in their view, would be submerged in a multi-purpose agency sensitive to suburban growth aspirations. Seizing the initiative during Fall, 1969, the City requested the governor to create a transit district. The suburban coalition, which planned to place a multi-purpose agency on the ballot the next year, opposed the City action. The governor, however, created Tri-Met, and appointed its directors, several of whom were members of the former Portland Blue Ribbon Committee.

In November, 1969, Rose City was locked in struggle with both the City of Portland over the financial dimension of a public takeover, and with the transit workers' union regarding a new contract. As in 1968, labor-management conflict threatened to disrupt service. Tri-Met dramatically intervened at this point, requesting a permit from the Portland City Council to operate a bus system. The Council granted a permit. The Tri-Met Board then took up the intensely controversial question of district finance.

Of all the mechanisms available to it, Tri-Met chose to implement an employer payroll tax. Sales taxes were becoming increasingly widespread as a revenue source for governmental transit operations around the United States. Since Oregon did not levy a sales tax, creating the administrative machinery necessary to collect this tax steered the Tri-Met Board away from it. The Board also sensed widespread political opposition to the imposition of an income tax. The only other tax that the Board could impose without a vote of the district electorate was a tax on employer payrolls. Tri-Met pioneered the use of this tax for transit in this country. Interestingly enough, in 1971 the Paris, France, metropolitan transit agency adopted a differentiated employer payroll tax to finance its operations. Indeed, the Paris approach of assessing employers in outlying areas at a lower rate than employers in the central region would have made a great deal of sense in Portland.

The Tri-Met payroll tax was bitterly condemned by outlying area business groups as grossly unfair. More than any other mechanism, the employer payroll tax crystallizes CBD-suburban conflict on the transit question. At a hearing preceding the Board's action, opponents charged that, "...businessmen in downtown Portland, not in the suburbs, would benefit from the metropolitan bus system." The Tri-Met Board President had earlier noted

that he, "...had not received any negative reaction from downtown retailers who will be paying a big share of the payroll tax." (Adler 1986, p. 33)

Within days, lawsuits were filed by suburban business groups challenging the constitutionality of the tax, and movements emerged in suburban Clackamas and Washington Counties to secede from the transit district. The rallying cry of the suburban opponents was: "Taxation without transportation." The roster of outlying businesses refusing to pay the tax mounted steadily, and referendum petitions circulated. Tri-Met, however, successfully resisted all the legal challenges, and was vindicated by the Oregon Supreme Court during the summer of 1970. The petition movement failed to gain the required number of signatures to place Tri-Met's future on the ballot. Recalcitrant businesses started to pay taxes. Tri-Met quietly moved to take over the private bus companies and create a unified regional system, composed primarily of downtown-radial lines.

Given the intense opposition that did, in fact, develop in suburban areas, the strategy pursued by the downtown Portland leadership regarding district creation, governing structure, and finance mechanism was politically astute. The transit movement leadership sought to insulate decision-making processes from suburban influence. The district creation law was written in such a way that only Portland could initiate the process. The governor would create the district, then appoint the board of directors. Consequently, suburban activists would have difficulty shaping events. Portland was able to do this because of its relative strength in regional and state political arenas. The choice of a finance

mechanism that did not require a vote further insulated the district from popular politics, and reflected the weight of the Portland leadership on the district Board.

The suburban-downtown conflict present at the creation of Tri-Met, combined with a finance mechanism that continually highlighted the conflict for suburban business and political leaders, produced a cautious regional agency. Tri-Met busied itself with modernizing the bus system it inherited, but failed to emerge as an activist agency on behalf of downtown Portland during its first years. Indeed, Tri-Met very early developed an image that perfectly reflected the conflict built into its governing and financial structures: CBD leaders saw it as overly cautious and ineffective as an advocate of downtown-oriented regional transit; suburban interests saw it as a tool of downtown interests seeking to maintain the dormitory status of outlying areas.

Early on, Tri-Met learned to wait upon the emergence of a regional consensus regarding major transport projects, rather than to seize the initiative. One consequence of its cautious approach has been that political, business, and technical officials representing the competing places within the region have defined Tri-Met's agenda. The agency has since been concerned to defend itself against the cost as well as political pressures that others might impose on it. These pressures reinforce an inward-looking orientation. Widespread dissatisfaction led the governor to appoint entirely new boards of directors in 1974 and again in 1977. The process of appointing board members was amended so that the governor appointed members to serve specified parts of the district. However, gubernatorial appointment continued to distance board members from constituents, contributing to the cautiousness displayed by the governing body.

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TRI-MET AND THE BANFIELD LRT LINE

A crisis in regional transportation planning during the mid-1970s opened up a window of opportunity for Tri-Met to emerge as an activist agency (Edner and Arrington, Jr. 1985).

A grass roots opposition movement blocked the construction of an inner city Interstate freeway. During a planning process designed to reallocate several hundred millions of dollars previously committed to the now withdrawn freeway, Tri-Met advocated an LRT-based approach rather than the busway rapid transit system that regional transport planners were considering. Consistent with its cautious approach to controversial regional transport issues, Tri-Met's primary reason for suggesting LRT was its concern regarding future operating costs.

Tri-Met suggested LRT technology as a more cost-effective way of responding to anticipated increases in service demand than an expansion of its bus system. The agency's goal was to substitute a smaller number of large capacity railcars, sometimes linked together in multicar trains, operated by one driver for the greater number of buses and drivers that would be required to provide an equivalent amount of passenger service. Since wages paid to drivers and to maintenance workers are overwhelmingly the dominant factor in the cost of producing transit services, this substitution was very attractive to an agency that was sensitive regarding its financial foundations. With City of Portland political and technical officials in the lead, supported by a newly-hired group of rail transit experts at Tri-Met, a downtown Portland-radial LRT line - the Banfield - emerged as the top priority project in the region.

Investments in all forms of transport share one central characteristic: their benefits are unevenly distributed across space. This creates access advantages for some places - those with stations, stops, and interchanges - while disadvantaging others. There are differences, however, in the extent to which particular technologies concentrate or disperse location impacts. A freeway concentrates advantages - around interchanges - to a much greater extent than a highway that serves property along its entire route. Transit vehicles running on guideways concentrate access benefits to a greater extent than vehicles running in the streets. The important guideway characteristics are their fixed nature and the substantial distance between stations. As in the case of freeway interchanges, these combine to concentrate accessibility impacts in the vicinity of station locations. Particularly regarding rail technology, the very high initial cost of the guideway creates an impression of longevity. The tracks are thought to be permanent features of the landscape - in a way that a fixed route bus is not - conferring place-specific benefits far into the future. It is important to recall, though, that extensive investments in street running railway systems were, in fact, abandoned throughout the country.

There is an additional consequence of station spacing, which is exacerbated by the choices of rail system planners to locate routes and stations along existing freight railroad rights-of-way, and near freeways in order to reduce right-of-way acquisition costs. The consequence is that in many cases relatively few patrons can walk to train stations. These less accessible stations must, therefore, be "fed" by buses and by automobiles via park-and-ride lots in order to build and maintain rail system patronage. Designing bus systems to feed rail stations may have negative financial as well as political consequences for a transit agency (Bendor 1985; Gomez-Ibanez 1985; Cervero 1984; Webber 1979).

Place-based coalitions of political, business, and technical activists seek investments in transport technologies that will provide growth-facilitating access advantages for their places. Competition between places, to maintain and attract mobile capital and labor, politicizes transport investment choices (Adler 1988, 1987; Logan and Molotch 1987; Peterson 1981). Technologies that concentrate benefits in space and across time, as rail transit and freeway projects do, are always controversial, particularly in metropolitan areas where competition between a CBD and suburban business centers is intense.

A regional consensus around an LRT project that would concentrate benefits in a small number of places - downtown Portland and a suburban business center at the other end of the line - was made possible by the availability of withdrawal monies to support highway projects aimed at facilitating locally-oriented economic growth elsewhere in the region. The need to create and maintain a regional consensus in order to secure federal government monies sheltered Tri-Met, producing a political environment conducive to the adoption of rail technology. Tri-Met also moved to offset the concentration of rail project benefits by embarking on a program of expanding bus service throughout the region, particularly downtown-radial suburban routes. These services were partly financed with operating subsidies the federal government had recently begun to make available. The regional consensus supported adoption of these bus service extensions as well.

TRI-MET AND WESTSIDE LRT PLANNING: PART ONE

When the federal government finally committed funds to build the Banfield LRT line, regional transport planners turned their attention to the next LRT project. Tri-Met joined seven other local governments and the state transportation department in an agreement on a westside LRT line as the region's next priority project. The Banfield line reflected an alliance of downtown Portland activists and their counterparts in the suburban city of Gresham, in the eastern part of the metropolitan area. The westside line reflected an effort to create a similar alliance between downtown Portland and political, business, and technical leaders in the eastern Washington County City of Beaverton. As in the case of the Banfield line, westside LRT would parallel existing freeway and rail freight rights-of-way for much of its length. The proposed line would not extend, however, into the western portion of the County, where a great deal of investment in high-technology electronic plants had recently taken place.

Agreement on a westside LRT alignment was reached in 1983, however, Tri-Met hesitated to apply for federal funds to begin preliminary engineering on this project. During 1985 its hesitation began to attract criticism. Tri-Met was deeply involved in building the Banfield LRT line at this point in time. Moreover, the agency was suffering financially as a result of the recession of the early 1980s. The recession hit Oregon especially hard, pushing unemployment rates well above the national average. With its financing tied to payrolls, Tri-Met experienced sharp declines in revenues as well in patronage. Following a period of growth in the latter 1970s, facilitated by operating subsidies provided by the federal government, during the early and mid-1980s Tri-Met was forced into a series of painful

service cuts and fare increases. Tri-Met claimed that its debilitated financial condition prevented it from coming up with sufficient LRT planning funds to match a federal planning contribution.

In addition to its financial and construction preoccupations, though, Tri-Met hesitated to begin westside LRT planning because opposition to the project had surfaced in the western portion of Washington County. The opposition reflected the increasing political as well as economic strength of this part of the metropolitan area, which is home to many of the region's high-technology electronics firms. At the same time, land use and economic development planners in Clackamas County joined with planners at the Port of Portland to propose an LRT line running south from Portland International Airport, through a connection with the Banfield line, to a major regional shopping center south and east of downtown. This proposed LRT line would follow the route of a recently constructed circumferential freeway for most of its length.

Tri-Met was aware of the western Washington County opposition. The agency's lobbyist and public affairs director noted the basis for their position: "I think they are concerned that an increased transit presence in the area will mean higher payroll taxes for them."

(Federman, 1985) Moreover, high-tech executives opposed LRT because they thought it would be an expensive failure. A reporter for the Hillsboro *Argus*, the leading newspaper in western Washington County, based in the County seat, went on to explain that the Tri-Met official knew that, "...the *Argus* and a lot of western Washington County businessmen have a long-standing grudge against Tri-Met because of its payroll-tax method of financing a large portion of its operations. The reason, of course, is that local

merchants, by being forced to pay the payroll tax, in effect are paying to send their own potential customers to Portland to do their shopping." (Jensen 1985)

The *Argus* editorialized an historical perspective on the issue which captured the essence of Tri-Met's changed geopolitical environment: "In...earlier years, Hillsboro was viewed by the larger city (Portland) as a 'bedroom community,' which provided workers for Portland's industries. That situation had a great deal to do with the development of Tri-Met as a payroll-tax supported regional transit agency, designed to take workers and shoppers from outlying 'bedroom' areas into Portland. Since the late 1970s, however, industrial development in Hillsboro and the Sunset Corridor has tended to turn that situation around." (*Argus* February 7, 1985) A Tri-Met Board member from Washington County noted as well that westside LRT did not have much support among his westside business contacts. They were more favorably disposed to a locally-oriented flexible bus system.

Washington County transport activists, particularly those in the west, were shifting their focus away from LRT to a north-south circumferential highway that they saw as more effectively serving their economic growth aspirations. Applauding this shift, the *Argus* editorialized, "...we would far rather see...money...spent to facilitate north-south traffic in Washington County - where it is urgently needed - rather than boosting travel from our County into downtown Portland." (*Argus* March 12, 1985)

These developments - opposition to westside LRT and support for the Bypass highway in Washington County, and support for the Interstate 205 LRT line in Clackamas County -

threatened to disrupt the fragile regional transport consensus that had protected Tri-Met since the mid-1970s, reinforcing the cautious behavior of Tri-Met.

TRI-MET AND WESTSIDE LRT PLANNING: PART TWO

Portland transit activists started to urge Tri-Met forward on westside LRT planning once again in 1987. Faced with worsening traffic congestion on the Sunset Highway leading into downtown from Washington County, the Portland City Council reaffirmed its commitment to a westside LRT line as the region top priority transport project. The state department of transportation urged Tri-Met to begin preliminary engineering on the LRT line as well, so that highway studies in this corridor could be done with the rail line in mind. This time Tri-Met was a willing participant.

The difference between 1985 and 1987 was the successful opening of the Banfield LRT line in September, 1986. On-time and under budget, Tri-Met's Metropolitan Area Express (MAX) boosted the agency's morale and its standing within the region. The success of MAX - which cost about \$200 million - owed a great deal to organizational changes Tri-Met instituted in advance of opening day. In addition, Tri-Met also tried to create more realistic patronage expectations for MAX than the forecasts that had been done in the 1970s to justify the project.

The original forecasts done as part of the Banfield LRT planning process, prepared during a period when the regional economy and transit ridership were growing, projected in excess of 40,000 riders per day. In the months before startup, Tri-Met dramatically

lowered its expectations to a pessimistic 10,000 per day, reflecting the recession-related ridership declines the agency had recently experienced. When first year patronage stabilized at about 19,000 riders per day, Tri-Met proudly talked about ridership exceeding expectations.

Within the organization Tri-Met chose to approach rail-related labor issues in a positive way so as to smooth the introduction of the new technology. Labor relations at Tri-Met, as at many other transit firms in the United States, had been especially bitter in recent years. In response to declining financial fortunes, transit managements have sought to reduce operating costs by introducing new work practices and re-introducing other long-abandoned practices, including contracting out functions to private sector firms, hiring part-time workers, and increasing the proportion of split shifts. Transit workers have vigorously resisted these efforts.

Tri-Met's financial difficulties during the early 1980s had produced quite substantial cuts in service and employment, exacerbating labor-management conflict. Given the deeply troubled state of bus-related labor relations, Tri-Met chose to work with its employees, rather than against them. Agency management decided to train its bus system workers to operate, and, more significantly, to maintain the rail system, rather than try to replace in-house personnel with skilled workers hired from outside. In this way, management integrated transit workers into the innovation process, thereby securing their cooperation and commitment to the success of the project. The indications are that morale at Tri-Met has improved dramatically since the trains started rolling. Absenteeism, previously a serious management concern, has significantly declined.

Tri-Met also moved to reconfigure its bus network in relation to the LRT line, creating a grid system in the LRT service area. Tri-Met hired a transit planner who specialized in designing and implementing grid systems. Some existing radial bus routes within the central city were reconfigured, emerging as crosstown lines centered on future LRT stations. In the outlying eastern portion of the metropolitan area, radial bus lines that would compete with LRT were rerouted to feed LRT stations. These bus system changes were put in place well in advance of the scheduled starting date.

Finally, Tri-Met chose to deal with the adoption of the new technology by integrating it within its current organizational structure. Rather than develop a separate rail division, which might create internal dissension, the agency created a joint rail/bus operating division and companion maintenance division, effectively tying the two technologies together. This supported the cross-training efforts aimed at maintaining labor support as well as facilitated coordinated servicing. While bus operators must take special training to operate MAX, personnel can, after training, move freely between technologies, limited only by seniority-based shift bidding rights.

The success of MAX and an upturn in the regional economy stabilized Tri-Met's financial situation, as well as its organizational stature. The agency was ready in 1987 to secure federal funds to begin preliminary engineering on the westside LRT line agreed to in 1983. However, western Washington County opponents who had been active in 1985 surfaced once again. In addition, suburban Clackamas County leaders complicated matters by strongly advocating the rail line they had begun studying in 1985.

An *Argus* editorial returned to the themes previously developed by the paper:

Every time planners zero-in on Washington County transportation needs, the topic seems to start and end with emphasis on a need for a transit system to better serve downtown Portland....What about intra-area services of Hillsboro, Aloha and Beaverton....There is a need for future planning to make a tie between the industrial plants in the northern end of Washington County with the retailing outlets and the expanding county residential neighborhoods - not with downtown Portland.... Planners need to put more service from Washington County to downtown Portland on the back burner and place the emphasis where the people of Washington County are living and business is growing. This is within the county and not in downtown Portland. (*Argus* January 7, 1988

)

The mayor of Beaverton countered the opposition from the western part of the County with the suggestion that perhaps the westside LRT line ought to continue south rather than turn west within the County. The suburban City of Tigard, located south of Beaverton, expressed interest, reflecting its own ambitious downtown revitalization efforts.

During the course of preliminary engineering, Tri-Met was reluctantly forced to conclude that the alignment adopted in 1983 for the portion of the line west of Beaverton was no longer acceptable. A new set of alternative alignments would have to be studied. Unlike the 1983 routing, all of the new candidates extended to Hillsboro in the west. What disturbed Tri-Met most about the troubling alignment discovery was the prospect of having

to reconstruct the official regional political alliance that had supported as well as shielded the agency for the past several years.

While controversy flared regarding westside LRT, the Clackamas County Department of Transportation and Development and County political officials were writing papers and making statements asserting the autonomous nature of the County's economic growth, its need for LRT to facilitate the County's development, and the logic of placing its Interstate-205 LRT project quite high on the regional transport agenda. These political and technical activists pointed to the much lower cost estimate for the I-205 rail line as compared with westside LRT, and the relative speed with which their rail line could be built. They had plans for another Clackamas County LRT line as well.

Clackamas County's assertiveness troubled Washington County officials. The chairperson of the Washington County Board of Commissioners said she thought Clackamas County officials no longer believed that the westside LRT line was and ought to be the region's number one transport priority. She thought that adding LRT lines to the regional list would threaten funding for the top priority: "You can't do a little part of everything, or nothing gets done." (Green 1988) A Clackamas County Commissioner responded that he was, "...shocked and appalled..." (Kohler 1988) by the accusation that his County was attempting to undermine the regional consensus. Clackamas technical and political officials affirmed their allegiance to westside LRT as the number one regional priority. They argued there would not be competition between the two projects because different funding sources would likely be involved. They wanted to make sure, however, that their project was

number two on the list, even as technical officials argued the attractiveness of the I-205 project in comparison with the westside.

Tri-Met responses to these developments display the coverage strategy in action. By extending the westside LRT line to Hillsboro, the agency was attempting to induce western Washington County business centers into an alliance with downtown Portland and downtown Beaverton. A Tri-Met Board member articulated the agency's approach to Clackamas County when he noted that more than one additional LRT line ought to be included in regional transport plans in order to generate more support throughout the metropolitan area: "Thinking small probably means success would be small." (Bodine 1987)

The coverage strategy clearly has limits, though, related primarily to cost. Covering the region with rail lines, even LRT lines utilizing freeway and rail freight rights-of-way, is estimated to cost more than \$600 million. In an era of diminishing federal government funding for rail transit capital projects, this implies substantial state, regional, and private sector financial commitments. These commitments, in turn, would have to rest on a regional political consensus, particularly regarding priorities, as firm as the one that supported MAX. Another limit of the coverage strategy is visible in Tri-Met's concern - reflecting its cautious side - with the cost of operating and maintaining the LRT lines. Consensus is required to fund these costs as well. Tri-Met has consistently backed or been forced away from imposing its own new taxes, most recently deciding against imposing a regional income tax. The directors have also declined to lead efforts seeking other state and local sources of finance.

THE SUBURBAN TURN: DIVERSIFICATION ONE

Tri-Met began diversifying the configuration of its bus service in the latter 1970s, even before it redesigned its bus network to accommodate MAX. In 1979 Tri-Met opened two timed-transfer suburban transit centers in Washington County. In 1988 two more were opened there, one of which was in Hillsboro. The Hillsboro center will be the focus of transit in western Washington County. These centers were designed to respond to the suburban interest in locally-oriented transit service. In addition to facilitating transfers to downtown Portland radial buses, the local services radiating from these centers permit suburban business places to penetrate their residential hinterlands as well.

Diversifying the structure of bus service in this way closely links this strategy with the coverage approach discussed in the rail context. A suburban transit center creates the possibility of an alliance based on peaceful coexistence, permitting, for example, Hillsboro and downtown Portland to contest for western Washington County residents, just as a rail station located in downtown Beaverton would permit. The growth aspirations of both places would be legitimated and facilitated.

However, the design requirements of the LRT lines that would cover the region may come into conflict with efforts to expand locally-oriented bus service via suburban transit centers. These stations require large park-and-ride lots and feeder bus service in order to build LRT patronage. These feeder services, which usually require substantial subsidies, may drain

resources away from local service oriented to suburban transit centers. The rail coverage strategy, therefore, may undermine a bus-based diversification approach.

Tri-Met is also studying more dramatic ways of diversifying its suburban services, focusing on paratransit possibilities. This study effort has been editorially applauded by the downtown Portland-oriented major metropolitan daily, *The Oregonian*. The editors explicitly linked western Washington County support for westside LRT to responsiveness regarding alternatives to downtown-radial service:

Suburban resistance to such projects as west-side light rail stems largely from businesses that doubt they get their money's worth while the benefits go to downtown competitors. Thus, completion of transit plans for suburban areas holds the promise of winning broader regional support for development of the metropolitan area....[S]ome grumbling on the outskirts about a system that does not address specific local transportation needs is understandable....A radial system to and from the core does not answer, for instance, a Tigard resident's question of how to get to Hillsboro without driving a car. So Tri-Met's study to establish the level of need for travel within suburban communities and methods of meeting it holds promise of rounding out a transit system. Support of nearby industry ought to follow. (*The Oregonian* April 4, 1988)

A diversified version of a coverage strategy is financially problematic, however, particularly if locally-oriented suburban service is provided using big buses, driven by unionized drivers, and running on fixed routes. The costs of implementing a diversified service strategy have intensified interest in contracting out the provision of these alternative

services, as well as other aspects of Tri-Met's operation, to private sector firms (Teal 1988).

Tri-Met's citizen advisory committee told the agency that, "...contracting out, constrained by the current labor agreement, continues to show excellent cost savings potential..." (Federman 1988c) especially for services in outlying areas. *The Oregonian* editorially called for public support for Tri-Met management efforts to negotiate rights to contracting, noting that, "It would...allow contracting with private companies for bus service in outlying areas, which Tri-Met has backed away from because of high costs." (*The Oregonian* April 27, 1988) Tri-Met's management and the Amalgamated Transit Union, representing the agency's drivers and mechanics, both acknowledge that, "...contracting out will probably take precedence over all other [issues] at the bargaining table." Tri-Met's general manager argues that, "If this agency is to survive in the years ahead, we must have the ability to contract out certain services...in outlying areas when a private carrier could provide such services a lot cheaper." (Federman 1988d) The union has made it clear that it will fight any effort to include contracting out in the next labor agreement.

Implementing a fully formed diversified service strategy will involve bitter conflict with transit labor. In the meantime, in addition to the initial implementation of this strategy, Tri-Met has altered its fare structure so as to induce suburban riders, many of whom stopped riding when fare increases and service cuts were instituted in the early and mid-1980s, to start riding again. An important factor motivating the fare restructuring was growing criticism regarding "Fareless Square" in downtown Portland. *The Oregonian's* transit reporter noted that Fareless Square critics were mostly to be found in, "...outlying business

communities who do not have a free-ride system in their areas. They say their Tri-Met payroll taxes help pay for a system that benefits only downtown Portland." (Federman 1988a) Tri-Met wanted to retain Fareless Square, but did not want to cover the region with free fare zones. The agency responded with a reduction in suburban cash fares and monthly pass prices, and by shrinking its former five zone system to three zones. The fare for the longest transit trip would decline from \$1.35 to \$1.15, and the cost of an all-zone monthly pass would decline from \$44 to \$37. Transit analysts, particularly in the academy, have long been loudly advocating a distance-based fare structure as both a more efficient as well as a more equitable way to price transit services (Cervero 1982). Tri-Met's five zone system had placed the agency within a select circle of properties that had heeded this call. Downzoning as a way of responding to suburban concerns will likely make the achievement of these objectives more difficult. However, the chairman of Meier and Frank, Portland's leading department store, said, "...the city's business community appreciated the retention of Fareless Square and that such action 'showed that Tri-Met had committed itself toward maintaining a healthy downtown business area.'" (Federman 1988b)

Tri-Met was willing to respond to suburban concerns with a revised fare structure, however, the agency's five year transit development plan for the period ending 1992 reflected caution. "The Plan seeks to increase ridership in Tri-Met's present markets. New markets, particularly those in the difficult-to-serve suburban areas, will be seriously studied. But the Plan does not envision significant service expansion or redeployment of traditional transit resources in new geographic areas." (Tri-Met 1987) New and expanded suburban services would be contingent on Tri-Met's ability to contract out for them. With

an eye toward escalating demands for building and operating LRT lines, the agency would explore public-private partnerships, as well as state and local government sources of revenues. Tri-Met pledged not to impose any new taxes during the coming five years, nor would it make any service cuts. Financial stability was the Plan's chief objective.

Tri-Met anticipated that, "This Plan will, no doubt, seem modest to those who wish for transit expansion to match, if not exceed, regional growth." (Tri-Met 1987) The agency was right. *The Oregonian* editorialized that the "...no new revenue...no growth..." Plan represented an abdication of leadership on the part of the Tri-Met Board and the management in the face of air quality and economic development challenges. The editors resorted to apocalyptic language reminiscent of the 1940s and 1950s in describing the consequences of a failure to expand transit: "New businesses might turn away from a community that is choking on its unsolved traffic problems....main-street congestion and intersection gridlock." (*The Oregonian* November 14, 87) The region's Joint Policy Advisory Committee on Transportation, the group responsible for articulating the regional consensus on transport questions, approved the Plan's objective of establishing a firm financial foundation for the transit agency. However, the Committee also emphasized its continuing interest in expanding both bus service and LRT, and its expectation that Tri-Met would play an appropriate role in the expansion process.

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS: DIVERSIFICATION TWO

Tri-Met estimates that MAX requires a local tax subsidy of approximately \$2.8 million. In an effort to eliminate this subsidy, Tri-Met is set to enter the land development business in

partnership with hotel and shopping center developers. A hotel would be built near the Oregon Convention Center that is currently under construction in Portland and is served by MAX. The shopping center is planned for a site near the end of the MAX line in suburban Gresham. Project Break-Even, spearheaded by a Portland City Council member, recently received its first funding installment from the United States Congress. The grant will permit Tri-Met to begin purchasing land for lease to private developers, and to build LRT stations on the Banfield line in conjunction with those projects. The Urban Mass Transportation Administration has estimated that the combination of lease revenues and revenues from additional ridership generated by the hotel and shopping center projects would be sufficient to offset the local tax subsidy to MAX.

The shopping center project has generated controversy, including opposition from the regional shopping mall located closest to Gresham. Tri-Met, as well as local and federal elected officials, have offered assurances to Gresham residents and business and political leaders that local land use planning objectives and processes will determine the future of the project. The Portland City Council member leading this effort disagreed that the suburban project would compete with downtown Portland, and would, therefore, be opposed by CBD business groups. He justified his support of the initiative with the argument that, "We cannot afford to look at the regional rail system as pitting downtown Portland against Gresham...[E]ven though my responsibilities are in the city of Portland, I am convinced I am serving the citizens of Portland best if we have a regional transit system." (Church 1988)

This seems a politically astute approach to financing a significant portion of the rail coverage strategy. Joint venture projects located at key rail stations would also facilitate alliances between downtown Portland and suburban business centers. Ventures of the sort that Tri-Met is embarking on in Gresham were strongly recommended by a Public-Private Task Force on Transit Financing, co-chaired by a Tri-Met board member and the Portland City Council member quoted above. Joint venture-related revenues could also lessen pressures to reduce bus service, and to impose new taxes that would be politically destabilizing for Tri-Met.

SHRINKING TO FIT AND DISAPPEARING?

Shortly after MAX started running, a state legislator introduced a bill to permit communities to secede from the Tri-Met district. The proposed law was in response to complaints from business and political leaders in several outlying areas. One City Council member in a suburban city pointed out that, "...merchants were unhappy about being forced to pay a payroll tax to finance bus service that transports potential customers to other shopping areas." (*The Oregonian* January 11, 1988) Other similarly situated secessionists revived the "taxation without transportation" protest of the Tri-Met creation period. Business and political leaders in these places argued that they paid out far more in payroll taxes than they received in bus service. The subsidy requirements of MAX, and other LRT lines yet to come, likely revived the smoldering resentment felt in those outlying areas without a prospect of inclusion in either a rail coverage or suburban transit center regional strategy.

Tri-Met supported the secession law, which passed the legislature easily. Indeed, a former Tri-Met Board president had himself advocated planned shrinkage as a way of cutting financial losses before the movement took shape. Shortly after state legislative passage, seven cities on the fringes of the district began exploring withdrawal. Tri-Met staff has recommended that the formal requests of three of these seven to secede be approved by the District Board.

Tri-Met has also sought to facilitate shrinkage by privatizing bus routes that it abandons. The agency has tried to secure a grant from the federal government to subsidize private operators serving two of its former routes. Tri-Met helped the private firms - a bus company and a taxicab outfit - to establish service. However, union opposition to privatization has, thus far, blocked the subsidy effort. The union stance on subsidizing private providers is similar to its vehement opposition to contracting out.

Shrinking clearly has strategic attractions for financially and politically insecure Tri-Met. However, shrinking will likely complicate the process of regional consensus building, particularly for large-scale projects involving downtown Portland. In addition, shrinking is conceptually a short step - though practically a long one - from disappearing Tri-Met, in its current form, entirely.

Two modes of disappearing the transit agency have resurfaced during the course of westside LRT planning. One is to change the Tri-Met Board of Directors from a body appointed by the governor to one that is directly elected by district within the region. The other is to have the Metropolitan Service District (Metro) take over Tri-Met. Metro covers

pretty much the same territory as Tri-Met, has a governing council directly elected by district, and is currently responsible for solid waste disposal, the zoo, and building the convention center. Created in 1978, Metro is the regional government agency suburban coalitions wanted to see in 1970 as an alternative to the single purpose Tri-Met transit district. Metro supporters expected that at some point in the not-too-distant future Metro would, indeed, take over transit responsibilities from Tri-Met. However, complex legal, financial, and political problems, having mostly to do with the status of bonds Tri-Met sold to purchase Rose City and the other private firms, have thus far complicated folding Tri-Met into Metro.

A council member in the Washington County suburb of Sherwood - a place that would not be served by a proposed LRT line - argued that it was time to change the structure of transit government in the region because, "The Tri-Met board appointed by the governor represents special interests and relates more to the (transportation) needs of downtown Portland than anywhere else." This suburban official felt that Tri-Met had, "...failed to recognize that the big challenge is in moving people around Washington County ...Historically, the focus of mass transit has been on downtown Portland...But it's obvious...that transportation needs have changed dramatically...and Tri-Met has not addressed these needs." The westside LRT project had crystallized these concerns for this council member: the project would serve some of the needs of suburban residents, but it still was, "...oriented to moving people to and from Portland." (Spielmann 1988) The council member felt that the only way to force attention to intra-county transit needs was to have an elected board member directly confront constituency pressure. A state legislative

Task Force on Metropolitan Regional Government has been given the assignment of reviewing mass transit.

An elected board of directors, whether of a multi-purpose or a single-purpose agency, would still have to confront the challenge which we noted at the beginning of this chapter: providing transit service to a multicentric metropolitan area. The bus-related requirements of rail technology, combined with the concentration of rail system benefits in space and over time, will also continue to complicate the process of regional consensus building. However, elected directors, with constituencies of their own, may be in a position to play a more active leadership role on transit questions - if and when they are able to formulate a consensus - than Tri-Met has historically been able to do.

RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

Competition between the central business district and suburban business centers is a geopolitical fact that metropolitan Portland has in common with many other metropolitan areas in the United States. Tri-Met's strategic responses to this contextual feature are likely to be present or evolving elsewhere as well. The agency's experience indicates the difficulties involved in attempting to be both efficient and effective, as Fielding urged. In theory, managers may be able to make their greatest contribution by being efficient. However, being effective - responding to constituent community demands in a geopolitical context of intense competition between places - presents serious obstacles to efficiently managing that which Fielding argues is under management's control.

Tri-Met has been in the region since its creation, but in an important sense it has not been of the Portland metropolitan area. The agency's ambiguous status, reflecting the spatial competition present when Rose City Transit went through its final death throes, produced a cautious streak in Tri-Met's directors and managers, particularly concerning new sources of local public finance. However, caution has not produced political stability. Increasingly assertive competing places have pushed for more downtown/radial service and pulled for more suburban accessibility, and have been either hostile, suspicious, or disappointed with Tri-Met's responses. Dissatisfaction has, in turn, engendered a great deal of turnover on the board of directors, continuing interest in dramatically restructuring the agency, and a secession movement.

Tri-Met's experience with the coverage and diversifications strategies illuminates the conflicting design, service, and fare imperatives of responding to the demands of a multicentric environment. Covering the region with rail lines responds to the downtown demand for increased reception capacity. Under certain circumstances, rail may increase operating efficiency as it substitutes capital for labor. However, planning and designing rail lines so as to minimize right-of-way acquisition and related costs reduces the possibilities of creating alliances in support of rail projects. It also makes it financially difficult to both reconfigure bus networks to feed rail stations and to diversify into covering the region with bus service oriented to suburban business centers. In addition, covering the region with rail lines is an extremely expensive strategy, implementation of which is more difficult given declining levels of federal government financial support. Private sources of rail project finance, therefore, emerge as a way of lessening the pressure that

downtown-suburban alliances would place on the transit agency's ever-fragile regional political support.

Financial constraints also induce agency interest in contracting out as a way of responding to suburban business center demands, as well as in planned shrinkage, both of which would increase operating efficiency. In the short-run, however, Tri-Met's suburban turn has resulted in a fare reduction for suburban riders, which compromises both efficiency and equity. Moreover, since the fare reduction primarily benefits downtown Portland and downtown commuters, it is unlikely to generate much support for the agency from suburban business center activists.

Tri-Met's history and the elements of its future that are presently visible indicate that the regional government agencies that emerged from the ashes of the privately-owned transit companies will be profoundly transformed in a multicentric metropolitan context. Spatial competition produces tendencies to disaggregation, which are reinforced by the differing technical/design requirements of downtown- and suburban-oriented transit. Private sources of project finance and private sources of service delivery, targeted to the demands of particular place competitors, emerge as structural elements suited to the new geopolitical context. Disaggregation will exacerbate the already intense pressures bearing on organized transit labor. The wage gains, protections, and work rules secured by labor during the transition from a private to a governmental industry, and advanced when subsidies were plentiful constitute barriers to implementing the new elements. Creating the political consensus necessary to plan and implement major transport projects will be increasingly difficult. The decline in extra-regional sources of funds, however, heightens

the role that regional political institutions will have to play in order to develop consensus on major new initiatives.

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