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Who pays the tab for transit? We all should

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Let's be honest.

The proposed new Central Indiana transit plan -- with its enhanced bus lines and rail service to Hamilton County -- is not going to make us park our cars for good.

We're not going to give up our fancy drives and SUVs.

And it's possible that many of us who work close to home in Carmel or Fishers or Noblesville, are not worked up about jumping on a train or bus to Downtown Indianapolis.

But some of us are.

Some of us -- many of us -- do work in

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Downtown Indy.

We attend Colts games, Pacers games, artsy events.

Or we simply wish we could enjoy Downtown Indy without having to put up with those ridiculous parking meters on the weekend.

And while I began this column with a reality check about holding on to our vehicles, I must say that over the past five years, I have known

many, many families who have downsized their fleet – going from two cars to one and making sacrifices to save on car payments and gas prices.

A few months ago, I hopped a ride on the Carmel commuter bus and met a few folks who were enjoying the ride for sure, but were also blunt in saying that it had become less of a luxury and more of a necessity, due to the economy.

These are folks who may live in Hamilton County, but they work, dine, shop and play in Indianapolis.

And yet, we are already hearing some people screaming about having to help pay for buses and trains for us "rich folk" here in the promised land.

They argue loudly that if they don't live near a bus line or a train line -- or if their area is not part of the big plan -- then they have no desire to support it. Make us pay for it, dag-nabit!

Interesting.

But is that the way it really works?

As a Carmel resident, I rarely drive on 126th Street in Fishers -- but does that mean my gas-tax dollars should not be used to help alleviate that once narrow nightmare of a road?

I rarely fly. But does that mean I should have been able to pull my funding away from the transportation department when the state upgraded I-465 and built the new I-70 lanes near the airport on the Westside?

Well, no. I guess I figure that what's good for those areas is also good for Central Indiana in general. We all pay into a pot of money, and we dole out that money in a way that, ideally, helps those who need it the most (first) and then the rest of us (eventually).

I can't wait until U.S. 31 gets upgraded from Indy to South Bend. My summer trips to Michigan are going to be so much easier. But if you never venture up to South Haven along Lake Michigan, should you be able to pull your support from that highway project?

So why should our government leaders buckle under the pressure of those who refuse to support a transit plan just because they have no

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intention of ever riding a bus or taking a train?

They shouldn't.

They should weigh the pluses and minuses.

They should consider the cost, of course.

But please, let's not hold this transit plan as something that needs to "make money" or "pay for itself." When's the last time a freeway made money? And yet, we spend money on paving, patching and potholes, don't we?

Lawmakers need to consider public opinion. There is a pretty good argument out there that questions whether we are dense enough in population to warrant a massive transit plan.

I don't know the answer to that one. But I do know I-69 is a monster, and if I lived in Fishers, I'd be trying to buy season tickets to the train right now.

And I do know that families continue to struggle to make ends meet -- yes even here on Milk & Honey Parkway -- and that public transportation could be one answer to helping a family pay the mortgage or put their kid through school.

In general, I think a transit plan is a step in the right direction. How big a step? Not my decision to make, thank God.

But let's keep this emotional debate civil and focused on the big picture.

Contact Star reporter Dan McFeely at dan.mcfeely@indystar.com or (317) 444-6253.

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