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New UCLA/Berkeley Law White Paper

Public transit in California, while historically underfunded compared to roads and freeways, has suffered even worse as the state's economy has tanked and [Sacramento legislators have raided transit funds to pay their general fund bills](#). But the buses and trains that comprise the state's transit system provide badly needed economic benefits for Californians. These benefits include the [jobs](#) created from new investment and the [money saved by households](#) who no longer need to buy so much gas or an extra car for commuting. And by making the state more livable, a good transit system can attract skilled workers and help residents avoid the [painful traffic congestion](#) that ruins the quality of life in the golden state.

Transit also benefits our environment. With vehicles causing almost 40% of the state's greenhouse gas emissions and air pollution that causes as [much premature death](#) as second-hand smoke and traffic accidents, transit is vital for keeping our air clean by taking cars off the road. Fewer autos also mean we can conserve our open space and prevent agricultural areas from being gobbled up by auto-oriented development. And of course for the poor, elderly, and disabled, the bus and passenger train system represents a critical — and sometime sole — means of transport.

But in tight budget times, few politicians seem to want to pay for transit. Transit riders don't exactly represent a powerful constituency in Sacramento and Washington, DC. So when it comes time to cut public services, transit is often among the first on the chopping block.

To explore ways to increase financing for public transit in California, UCLA and Berkeley Law gathered experts at UCLA Law back in November. These individuals, including academics, advocates, business leaders, and environmentalists, offered some novel and useful ideas for bolstering the state's existing system. We discuss these and more in our newest white paper, released today, called [All Aboard: How California Can Increase Investments in Public Transit](#) (available at both [UCLA](#) and [Berkeley's](#) websites).

Among other ideas, the report recommends that policy makers:

- Help local governments leverage more dollars from their existing revenue streams for transit. For example, Congress is considering the "[America Fast Forward](#)" plan, which would offer cities such as Los Angeles federal no- or low-interest loans to be repaid from local sales tax revenue dedicated to transit. This proposal may actually have bipartisan support.
- Change the state gas tax to an indexed tax, whereby it would be calculated as a percentage of the total gasoline purchase rather than a fixed per-gallon charge.
- Create regional tax increment financing zones for transit, in which regional agencies fund transit with bonds to be repaid from increments of future property tax revenues that rise due to the proximity of these parcels to transit (similar to how redevelopment agencies work).

Without this kind of action to bolster transit financing, the state is at risk of falling behind on climate change goals, local economic growth, and overall quality-of-life. It's time to get moving.