

Differing Opinions About Who Should Serve on OCTA Board

TRACY WOOD | Posted: Wednesday, May 25, 2011 10:15 pm

Thursday, May 26, 2011 | The Orange County Transportation Authority this week unanimously voted to oppose a bill pending in the state Legislature that would change the way some city representatives to the 18-member board are selected.

Specifically, the bill proposed by Sen. Lou Correa (D-Santa Ana), would limit the terms of representatives from smaller cities. The bill passed the Senate last week and is pending in the Assembly.

"The intent of the bill is to give more representation to the cities in Orange County," said Correa in a telephone interview. He said his measure would affect only five of the 18 seats, resulting in more frequent rotation among the smaller cities.

OCTA board members have a different view. The bill will lower the quality of city representation in the same way term limits have degraded the caliber of the Legislature, the board says.

The OCTA board deals with billions of dollars for highways, streets, toll roads and bus service, and it is considered a plum appointment among city officials.

All five members of the county Board of Supervisors sit on the panel as well as two public members and a non-voting representative of CalTrans. Ten more appointees come from cities, two from each supervisorial district.

The present system was created in 2004 by a bill authored by Correa when he was a member of the state Assembly.

The five large cities that are members of the board are Santa Ana, Anaheim, Huntington Beach, Lake Forest and Orange.

Representatives from smaller cities are selected by the volunteer Orange County City Selection Committee, which picks one from a city in each supervisorial district.

Since the current appointment system went into effect six years ago, some smaller cities have served long terms. Garden Grove has been on the board the entire time. Tustin and Laguna Niguel have held seats for five years, Costa Mesa and Buena Park for four years.

Meanwhile, Irvine, the county's third largest city, hasn't had a seat on the board since the early 1990s, shortly after the agency was formed, said the city's public information officer, Craig Reem.

In its present version, Correa's bill would in effect set four-year term limits for the smaller cities.

OCTA board members said the ultimate effect of Correa's bill would be to lower the amount of expertise on the board and set in motion an attitude among the small city representatives that their goal is to get perks for their cities while they have the chance.

"In a broader sense, I think it [term limits] changes the motivation" of elected officials, said Board of Supervisors Chairman Bill Campbell. "People say, 'I've got to get mine.'"

Campbell was a member of the Assembly from 1996 until 2002. He said term limits lead elected officials to be constantly working to position themselves to run for another elective office.

He said a strength of the current board is that it takes a regional view of transportation issues rather than being in a position where individual cities are competing for an advantage.

Board member Jerry Amante, mayor of Tustin, put it more succinctly, saying representatives to boards like OCTA "need time in grade to be able to learn."

In Sacramento, he said, term limits simply "led to a shift in power to the third house [lobbyists] and special interests."

But Correa said setting limits on how long the small cities can serve would benefit a number of cities. "For years," he said, "many cities have expressed concerns" about not being able to win a seat on the board.

Irvine is one of those cities. Irvine Mayor Sukhee Kang sent Correa a letter of support when the measure was in the state Senate.

"The periodic 'cycling' of representation for small cities that you propose would for the first time provide a hedge against decisions that consistently and disproportionately benefit an exclusive group of large city stakeholders," said Kang in his letter.

Yet Correa said he understands the importance of experience on the OCTA board. "I get it. I'm trying to balance those two issues [experience vs. wider representation]. I'm not putting term limits on everybody."

One big objection from several board members is that new boundaries are being drawn for the five supervisorial districts. The remapping is required each 10 years after the national census.

New maps aren't expected to be available until September, and they could change the boundaries enough that a few cities might move from one district to another.

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