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Airport TRAX funds take twisty path

Money will come from vehicle registration fees

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The Legislature slammed one TRAX funding option door shut but opened another for Salt Lake City leaders in need of \$35 million to build a light-rail line to the airport.

In the end, SB245 was a love/hate thing for Salt Lake City leaders.

First, the bill blocked them from using airport improvement funds to fill a \$35 million funding gap for the TRAX line to the airport. Senate Majority Leader Curt Bramble, R-Provo, said those funds should be used to physically improve things at the airport, like expanding the Delta Air Lines hub.

But then, Bramble included another clause in SB245 that would give the city enough to solve the problem.

"When we think about where we started in this session, with the Legislature not only taking away our authority to use existing revenues, but then leaving us without a way to fund the light-rail line to the airport, we'd have to call this at least a partial success for us," Salt Lake City Mayor Ralph Becker said. "The Legislature was able to find an alternate source of money to fund the line. It allows us to move forward."

In the end, the \$35 million will come from a fraction of the \$10 fee Salt Lake County residents pay when registering their vehicles, after a bit of shuffling of funds between Salt Lake City and the Utah Transit Authority.

The money, however, does come with some strings attached. The registration fee revenue can only be used for roads, so Salt Lake City would take that money, use it for roads, and then give UTA other money from other funds.

"We would have to do some shifting within our budget to make that work," Salt Lake County Council Chairwoman Jill Remington Love said. "It would be our hope that we wouldn't have a loss at the end of the day."

Technically, Salt Lake County is in charge of divvying up the vehicle registration fee revenue, and if leaders there ever decided to stop giving that revenue to the city, the city would be in a bind, since it would be locked in a long-term interlocal agreement with UTA.

"The bill has been crafted now to come up with some solutions to solve" Salt Lake City's airport TRAX line funding problems, said House Majority Leader Dave Clark, R-Santa Clara.

Still, Becker is "concerned about the Legislature's willingness to step into the city's shoes and tell us how to manage our business."

The bill also creates two new mechanisms that both Utah County and Washington County leaders can use to raise money to help their respective airports.

Now, second-class counties can increase their local sales tax for airport, highway and transit projects. Provo wants to add a radar system in the facility there, and Washington County is building a brand new airport. The revenues also could be used for road projects in Weber and Davis counties, Clark said.

The bill also allows counties to use tourism and recreation dollars for airport improvements. On top of that, Provo leaders received \$1 million in one-time funding from the Legislature to help fund a local match for the \$5 million radar. The city wanted \$1.25 million, but Provo Mayor Lewis Billings is still happy with what his city received.

Billings said city officials will look at other funding options to get a radar at the airport. He said they may talk to other communities and stakeholder organizations that have an interest in securing radar for the airport.

"All of Utah County gets a clear benefit," Billings said. "We'll get it done."

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