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Cap Metro Courting Prospective Partners

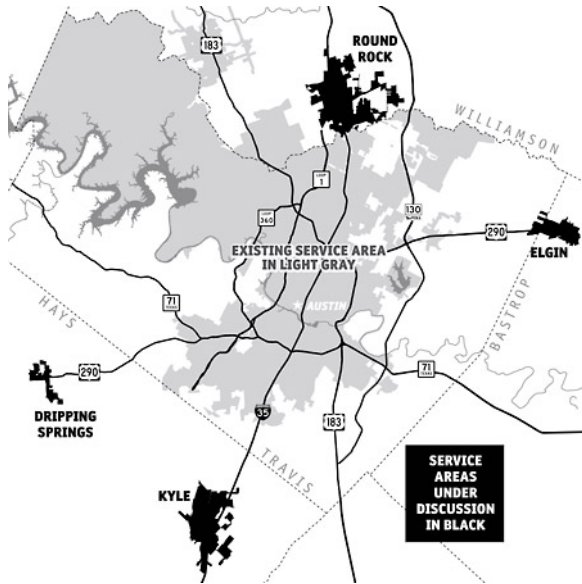
By Katherine Gregor

New rail transit service between Elgin and Austin – enthusiastically advocated by **Elgin** leaders – came a step closer to reality Monday. So did the broader initiative for a transit system linking the entire Central Texas region. **Capital Metro's** board approved a new Service Expansion Policy that paves the way for actively inviting surrounding communities to become contractual partners in new or expanded transit services. The board's action signals a major policy shift for Cap Metro. Until now, efforts to create regional rail systems linking Austin with surrounding communities have been stymied by the fact that many are outside the Cap Metro service area – that is, they've been unwilling or unable to cough up the 1% of their local sales tax that's the price of admission. But under "pay to play" contracts, these communities could simply agree to pay for service outright, unhindered by state restrictions on raising local sales tax.

"We're excited to have the opportunity to take our discussions to the next level," said Jeff Coffee, city manager of Elgin and an advocate of transit-oriented development. "Elgin has incredible potential to implement the development strategies that this region wants and needs. In order to achieve this vision, we will need partners who share our common goals. Capital Metro's actions are an essential step toward developing the Austin-Manor-Elgin

transportation corridor." Manor is already in the service area. A detailed proposal for commuter rail service is chugging toward consideration by the **Transit Working Group** at the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization. Start-up would be relatively affordable because the right-of-way and track are already in place.

Cedar Park now wants a stop on the new commuter rail **Red Line**, linking Downtown Austin to Leander, of course; as it stands, the train will zip right through town with no stops. Why? Cedar Park and neighboring Pflugerville pulled their money out of Cap Metro about 10 years back. But today they'd like to talk. So would Kyle, Dripping Springs, Round Rock, Hays County, and other surrounding communities. Expanded passenger rail service from San Antonio to Austin and potentially north to Georgetown also could be done on existing tracks. Cap Metro spokesman Adam Shaivitz said, "Regarding who we want to pursue as active partners, the answer is 'everyone.' Capital Metro is ready and willing to work with all communities." New financial partnerships could generate revenues to help fund new Central Austin circulator transit – the much-discussed streetcar circulator – cited as critical for regional rail to work. "Getting around Downtown Austin is just as much of a problem for the regional partners as it is for Austinites," noted Leander Mayor John Cowman.



Capital Metro could extend bus and rail service beyond its existing service area to include Cedar Park and Round Rock in Williamson Co., Elgin in Bastrop Co., and Kyle and Dripping Springs in Hays Co.

Six Vie for Post

Meanwhile, the Cap Metro board needs a new **Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization** representative and a new board chair. Since **Lee Walker**, who held both positions, resigned in early April, a two-step search process has been moving along quietly. As the first order of business, CAMPO (specifically, the elected officials on its Transportation Policy Board) must select another rep to replace Walker. The application period closed June 27, yielding just six candidates: **Mike Martinez** (Austin City Council member), **John Cowman** (Leander mayor), **John Trube** (former mayor of Buda), and private citizens **Norm Chafetz** of Austin, **Paul Hamilton** of Texas

State University, and **Mike Manor**, a Travis Co. employee. Cowman and Martinez are already on the board at Capital Metro, representing their respective cities. Shifting over to become the board's CAMPO representative could allow them to take a more regional, big-picture stance, open new board seats for their cities – and better position them to be tapped as chair. Travis Co. Judge **Sam Biscoe**, leading the search process, said it could take a month or more for CAMPO to name the rep.

Cap Metro board members select their own officers; historically, the chair hasn't been a city representative. Who doesn't get an official vote in either selection process? CAMPO board Chair **Kirk Watson**. But no one imagines that he won't have a strong voice. (One insider's guess: If Watson prioritizes a Cap Metro board chair with the skill set to build consensus around CAMPO's peer review and strengthen regional partnerships, that could favor Trube; if the priority is resolving Cap Metro's labor-union fight and other clear-cut issues, Martinez could be the man.) Meanwhile, a Cap Metro fare increase is heading toward a vote by a committee made up of three mayors, three Travis Co. commissioners, and five Austin City Council members.

Noted Biscoe of the demanding, unpaid Cap Metro board chair position, "If you don't like politics, this would not be the job for you."