

Working on the Railroad

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It's a come-to-transit moment.

Before standing-room-only crowds, a historical brokering of a regional Central Texas transit system – focused on rail, not roads – has been taking fascinating shape at a series of Monday morning work sessions at City Hall. The Transit Working Group convened by the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization is going boldly where the region has never gone before. For the first time, all of the many transportation and governmental powers-that-be are talking collaboratively about partnering to create a comprehensive system of appealing rail (and rapid bus) alternatives to cars and congestion.

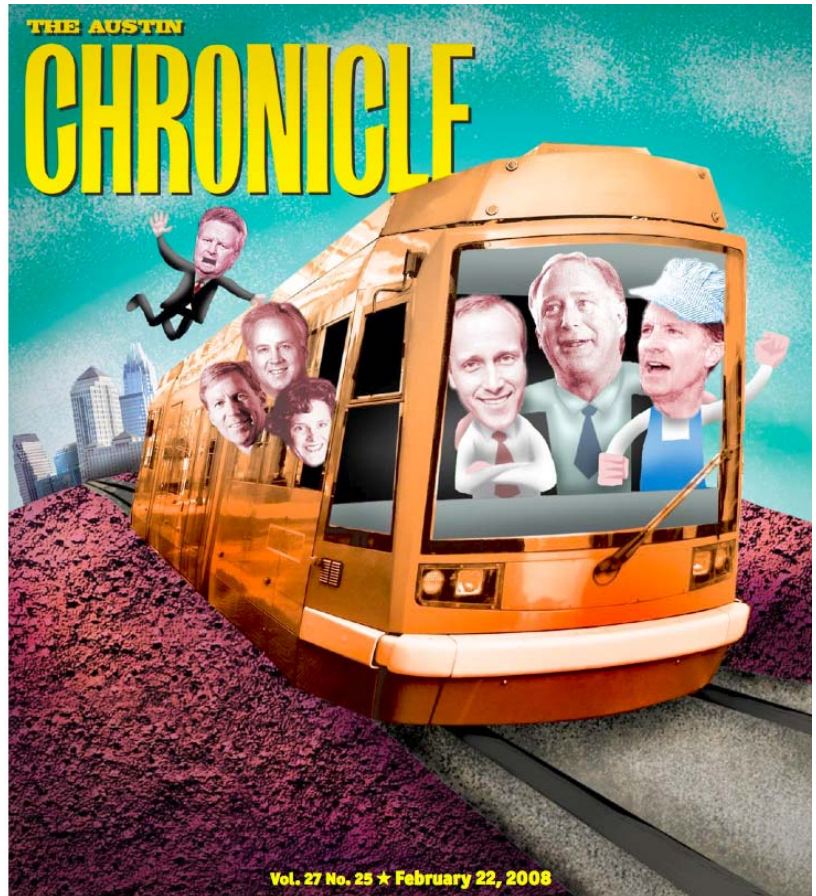
"We are in a time of landmark change when it comes to transportation," observed Hays Co. Commissioner Jeff Barton, one of the group's 15 members. Assembled by CAMPO board chair and state Sen. Kirk Watson, the transit workers represent diverse political leanings, jurisdictions, public piggy banks, and transportation priorities. Equally broad-spectrum are the plans, funding sources, and authorized service areas of the cities and transit entities presenting: Capital Metro, the Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority, and the Austin-San Antonio Intermunicipal Commuter Rail District.

What's most striking thus far is how close Austin and the region could be to a collaborative solution, if – and it's a big if – the money can be cobbled together. An impressive amount of planning for passenger-rail transit already has been done, albeit in a fragmented fashion. Continued Barton, "Timing is everything, and I have a sense that we might be at a place in the region's history, and in the zeitgeist, where we are all ready to sing 'Kumbaya,' or maybe 'Happy Trails,' together."

"This is a historical moment, a remarkable moment!" celebrated Brewster McCracken, vice chair of the group, at its Jan. 14 meeting. At working group sessions, McCracken has emerged as an eager facilitator who regularly frames ideas and data under consideration to emphasize common interests and to push toward unity of vision. Citing recent endorsements of transit and density (and their progeny, transit-oriented development) from diverse groups – the Real Estate Council of Austin, the Austin Neighborhoods Council, the city of Austin, the Downtown Austin Alliance, Clean Water Action – he stressed: "We've come together! These groups came at it from opposite ends, but they've reached the same conclusion."

Rail's Optimal Role

The initial drive to create a fast-moving but transparent public



process came from Mayor Will Wynn. In November 2007, Wynn declared himself "ready to roll" on getting a referendum before voters for new passenger-rail transit in November 2008. Wynn and McCracken are most focused on getting under way a modern streetcar (ultralight rail) urban circulator, with service out to the city-owned Austin-Bergstrom International Airport. The airport link could allow significant airport-backed bond funding. The line envisioned would run from the airport down East Riverside to Downtown, then continue north through the Capitol Complex and UT campus, on out to Mueller. The city's Feb. 11 presentation to the Transit Working Group detailed the extensive groundwork already laid for that line – on the land-use planning, engineering, and financial fronts.

But an Austin circulator is just one part of the group's charge: "to analyze and evaluate the potential for rail in Central Texas, and the optimal role for rail as part of a comprehensive regional transportation plan," with roads and dedicated-lane rapid buses and bike paths, too. Much discussed by the group are two other tantalizing rail projects that could run on existing track, thus eliminating the huge cost of buying land for rights-of-way. Those are 1) a commuter service linking Central Austin with Elgin and 2) an Austin-San Antonio service. The latter will take longer to put together, in part due to the wildly expensive need to first reroute Union Pacific freight service (although a short-term Amtrak solution is being pursued). Developing all three services together would be ideal so that they can reinforce one another's ridership and ultimate success.

Wynn is chairing the group because he feels an urgent personal sense of mission to leave a legacy of passenger rail when he steps down as mayor next June. "For too long, we didn't make the land-use and transportation-planning decisions necessary to accommodate future growth," said Wynn, in first announcing the group's charge. "We're paying for that now in longer drive times, lost productivity, environmental degradation, and a host of other problems that come from sprawl."

A promising sign of change: Wynn's message has found favor even with the traditional business community. On Feb. 12 the Austin Chamber of Commerce named Wynn "Austinite of the Year." Specifically cited was the mayor's work on clean energy, climate protection, Downtown urban planning and development, and regional transportation – including his current push for a modern streetcar. In effect, the chamber award endorsed Wynn's inter-related campaigns for both climate protection and rail transit in Austin. Last year the chamber's Take On Traffic campaign pushed hard for toll roads; after attending last week's Transit Working Group meeting, former campaign Chair Gary Farmer said the chamber hasn't forgotten its commitment to think comprehensively and now pursue transit as well. But the mayor's determined push for a November election dictates, in turn, a fast-track decision-making process by the group. To meet that timeline, the group's recommendations will need to go to the full CAMPO board by May for endorsement – or not.

Not everyone is convinced of an immediate need for rail transit, or an election. The most vocal doubter on the group has been Gerald Daugherty. "I have been a hard sell on transit being a traffic reliever," he affirmed recently. "But I'm willing to see what people are thinking about. We haven't really gotten down to determining what kind of system we're even talking about and how we would finance it. We haven't even begun to really put a pencil to it. I want to see real numbers."

Good Process, Good Policy

In consultation with CAMPO board Chair Watson, Wynn and McCracken determined that regional transit decision-making should follow the same CAMPO working group process used for toll roads. (That process took eight months.) The open public process allows for broad input and community discussion. Perhaps equally important, invoking the same process clearly establishes rail transit as a major CAMPO initiative, on a par with toll roads. Always mindful of Austin's failed 2000 light-rail election, the conveners saw the wisdom of building consensus recommendations through a careful, systematic, efficient, and honest process. The goal was good public policy – and the broad buy-in essential to advance it.

Transit Working Group members representing rail-adverse perspectives would have to absorb and think through transit's real costs and benefits, publicly respond to the data presented, and hear one another out. Without a doubt, the working group would have to determine the true cost-effectiveness of rail transit as a transportation alternative, compared to roads.

"Even if we can pay for it, would it prove to be cost-beneficial?" asks Daugherty. "How do we use our precious few dollars to benefit the greatest number of people? Let's look at what the cost modeling is going to tell us. If it shows it is cost-effective, as a way to move large numbers of people

around the region, then you'll even get a Gerald Daugherty and a Jim Skaggs to say, 'Okay, we need to continue to look at it.'"

But to ensure a truly holistic look at costs, the conveners strongly desired an open forum for broadly linking rail transit to community values. While harder to quantify, those factors also translate to hard costs and opportunity costs over time. They include quality of life, environmental and climate protection, sustainability, affordability and social equity, freedom of choice, a physical vision for Central Texas, and protecting the region's long-term competitive strength. Williamson County Rep. Mike Krusee, another working group member and regional transit's most passionate Republican advocate, stresses the critical importance of evaluating it not just in terms of mobility but by two other key criteria as well: economic development and social/environmental impacts.

Actively in play for the proposed voter referendum: Exactly what transit modes and lines would voters be authorizing? Would voters simultaneously vote yea or nay on general obligation bonds or other funding? Who would call the election – Capital Metro? The city of Austin? The Regional Mobility Authority? That's what the group members need to help determine, and fast. Rail systems take a long time to plan and build – so proponents believe there's no time to waste. Even if voters do approve new commuter rail this November, McCracken pointed out, it would take at least two to three years, and possibly four or five, for a circulator service to become fully operational.

As a stopgap or alternative to rail, the Real Estate Council of Austin on Jan. 14 presented a proposal for a rubber-tire Downtown circulator. RECA's study cited an estimated cost of \$101 million to pair rapid buses with five new parking garages (at more than \$87 million) sited near the four corners of Downtown. That kind of money could fund a lot of streetcars. RECA's membership, once strongly conservative and anti-rail, has developed a stronger progressive faction – thus the odd compromise of a transit proposal. (Like all presentations made to the Transit Working Group, it's online at www.campotexas.org.) RECA's Downtown park-and-ride alternative yielded an immediate rebuttal from the pro-streetcar Downtown Austin Alliance, too-polite comments from several group members, and gentle correction by Capital Metro. But McCracken continues to celebrate RECA's insight that increased density requires transit – embracing its first, tentative stumble into the transit fold. He played up commonalities between RECA's loop route and Cap Metro's current effort to rethink the 'Dillo, with a simpler route & increased frequency.

Tolls-to-Transit

The broader "mobility" context, of course, is last year's embattled 15-4 vote by the CAMPO board that approved a \$1.45 billion package of five new toll road projects. When it became clear to transit advocates like Wynn, McCracken, and Travis Co. Commissioner Sarah Eckhardt that they didn't have the votes necessary to defeat toll roads, they shifted their energies to attaching as much good public policy as humanly possible to the distasteful toll road package. That set the stage for the current "Phase II" CAMPO transit effort. The good-policy aspects included: free dedicated high-occupancy-vehicle lanes with rapid bus service (especially important for

low-income folks without cars); maintaining local toll road control by the Regional Mobility Authority, not the Texas Department of Transportation; preventing privatization; specifying that net toll tax revenues are controlled by the people of Central Texas; and committing CAMPO to a regional long-term plan for reducing vehicle miles traveled.

Most important for the funding of transit, an Eckhardt amendment established that all surplus revenues generated by the five toll roads (and any future ones) must stay with their corridors, in perpetuity. Thanks to that policy, those roads now could fund passenger-rail service running alongside toll roads, within two miles. (Nothing more keenly piques a stalled driver's interest in switching to transit than watching a train zip right by.) Some projections indicate that local toll roads will yield substantial monies – which all flow to the Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority. By way of example, the original authority projections for the toll portion of 183A that opened in March 2007 near Lakeline Mall show that road yielding ever-rising revenues over time. By 2045, 183A was projected to net more than \$68.5 million annually (worth about \$17 million in today's dollars). As the road is already carrying double the traffic anticipated, that revenue stream should only get sweeter. (But as 183A predates the 2007 package and policy revisions, its excess revenues may never fund rail transit.) On some local toll roads, however, net revenues could prove scant or nonexistent.

Under Watson's leadership, CAMPO has been changing course to assert the "planning" in "planning organization," broaden its mission beyond road-approval, and increase the public transparency of its decision-making and financial processes. (CAMPO currently is seeking a new executive director; experience with transit is a crucial hiring criteria.) Of course, construction of the toll road projects has since been threatened by TxDOT reneging on the \$500 million to \$700 million it had promised. After TxDOT recently blamed the shortfall on a little \$1.1 billion accounting error at a Feb. 5 state Senate committee hearing, a steamed Watson basically asked: "Are y'all liars or just grossly incompetent?" But who knows – a decade from now, perhaps Central Texans will look back on the missing toll road funding (compounded by similar-sized loss in federal transportation dollars) as a blessing in disguise: It adds even more motivation to partner collaboratively on transit.

Transit-Oriented Development

Presentations and discussions at the weekly Transit Working Group work sessions since Jan. 7 have enthusiastically documented rail transit's benefits. While members such as Daugherty still question whether drivers will switch to transit, everyone presenting so far clearly sees it as good for the region. Traffic congestion and air pollution are universally reviled. Presenters reiterate that getting people out of their cars protects the environment, averts global warming, supports clean air and water, and addresses Austin's imminent threat of hitting Environmental Protection Agency nonattainment status on air quality. (While federal adoption of new metrics technically could throw us into that attention-getting status soon, Eckhardt said it's likely to take years for the feds to implement new, enforced air-pollution reductions. "It brings so much other baggage; you don't want to go there if you can avoid it," she observed of nonattainment.)

Rail transit also has a proven track record of stimulating economic development – a true godsend for forging bipartisan support. Transit-oriented development arises around fixed rail lines (and to a lesser extent, dedicated lanes for rapid buses). As multiple presenters have attested, TOD increases local governments' and school districts' property-tax base and sales-tax revenues and offers handsome profits to private landowners and developers. At the Jan. 7 meeting, delegations from the cities of Leander and Elgin showed up to sing the praises of commuter rail – establishing that it's not just the darling of liberal Austin. Cap Metro's Red Line from Leander begins service to Downtown Austin this fall (it would connect to a future streetcar); now Elgin wants its own "right arm" line for the 50% of its residents who commute to work in Austin. Elgin City Manager Jeff Coffee is a Transit Working Group member.

"Elgin knocked people's socks off!" said Wynn. "Half the town showed up!" Why? Elgin's own economic development projections show that rail service would drive transit-oriented development, capable of increasing Elgin's tax base by more than \$664 million and yielding about another \$2.5 million in annual tax revenues. Plus Elgin says it wants to enjoy TOD's positive effects on diversity, walkability, community, urban form, and streetscapes. (When a small Texas town best known for its smoked sausage starts shopping a civic PowerPoint heralding "Good Urban Form," the zeitgeist has shifted indeed.)

What Elgin doesn't have are the deep pockets required to get the service up and rolling. (The similar Red Line to Leander was budgeted at \$90 million; one early cost estimate for the Elgin line was \$80 million.) Between 2000 and 2006, Elgin's population exploded by 50%, from 6,000 to 9,000 – but that still yields relatively few transit riders. The investment required would prove cost-effective only if it attracted a dense new population of rail-riders to the Manor-Elgin corridor. Nonetheless, many group members are bullish on the Elgin line, for its relatively low costs, benefits to a regional system, and potential to produce dense New Urbanist development along the line. "It's low-hanging fruit," said Eckhardt. "The rail line and right-of-way already exist – it's a matter of some permit changes and purchasing some passenger cars. The market is there."

Collaborative Funding

But is the funding there? The question of money and proving cost-effectiveness remains the dark cloud threatening to rain on all this transit euphoria. The hope is that if multiple partners shake their piggy banks together, they can produce sufficient funding for a regional system that serves all parties' interconnected interests. As Eckhardt summed it up, "What we are doing is to start a much deeper conversation, and a deeper level of coordination, to identify mutual interests and partnerships."

Asked why planning by all the various transportation entities and governments has been so disjointed and noncollaborative to date, Eckhardt explained: "The reason we have so many dang entities is because of our state tradition of not providing state funding for state infrastructure. It's designed to be uncoordinated. It's a function of revenue sources.

"Now that even more funding responsibility is devolving

down to the region, we are trying valiantly – and somewhat successfully – to buck that design and actually talk to one another," she continued. The fragmented funding comes from diverse sources available to some entities and service areas, but not others; for example, Capital Metro's penny tax can't be spent in Elgin, which is outside its service area. "In a brave new world of cooperation," said Eckhardt of Elgin, "we could recognize that they're paying a toll tax on 290 East – which could possibly go toward funding a rail line. That kind of pooling of both resources and authority to reduce overall [vehicle miles traveled] per capita would just be a huge benefit for the region."

Whether significant surplus toll taxes will actually materialize remains unknown. Within a few months, the Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority will present to CAMPO a proposal for financing the five-project toll road package approved in October. CTRMA has no dedicated tax revenues, only tolls with which to potentially fund projects. To broaden its options, CTRMA currently is circulating a request for proposal seeking strategic investment partners; Executive Director Mike Heiligenstein said 11 major finance firms have expressed interest, including big names like JPMorgan, Goldman-Sachs, Balfour Beatty, and Morgan Stanley. (Krusee favors private-sector partners who build systems, rather than just lending the money – with contracts specifying public benefits and that the private partners assume the risks.) The CTRMA wants to improve mobility with all types of transportation; along 183A, it now is developing a bike-pedestrian trail. The level of financing obtained through the request for proposal will determine how strongly CTRMA can participate on transit, said Heiligenstein – if they're invited to the table.

"Everyone's still trying to feel their way through all of this," he observed. "I feel like there's a new attitude, very hopeful, very positive. Through the Transit Working Group, I've developed such good relationships with people who are really trying to do the right thing. The right people are teed up."

The Road Ahead

Regional employers could offer another pool of viable and engaged partners. A major employ-ers summit on transit – co-sponsored by the Austin Chamber of Commerce, the Alliance for Public Transportation, and the Seton Family of Hospitals – kicked off in August 2007 and met again Feb. 11. Companies participating include Dell, Freescale, and IBM; other employers conversing include UT and Texas State University. Watson has facilitated the discussions; he characterized the participants' responses as "very positive." Working group member Brandon Janes (the 2008 Take On Traffic chair) co-hosted this month's summit. He anticipates it will result in a consensus "request of elected officials to address regional transportation planning in the context of land use and a sustainable community." He says the employers seek "a comprehensive regional transportation network that has specific objectives, metrics, and is financially sustainable" (comprehensive being the code word for "with rail transit"). To make the business case for something other than roads, said Watson, the summit is addressing transit in business terms: efficiency, value-capture, clear objectives and

metrics, long-range financial planning, attracting high-quality employees and retaining them.

On Feb. 11, the city of Austin presented a status report on its rail-readiness, covering topics such as the preplanned Mueller right-of-way for transit, core transit corridors, and a recent positive feasibility study on running rail lines along Riverside Drive out to the airport. All along its desired streetcar circulator alignment, land-use planning already completed by the city nicely supports rail. ROMA Design Group presented its related work on the Downtown Austin Plan to City Council on Feb. 14; the urban planners soon will study and make recommendations for the entire streetcar route.

The last scheduled Transit Working Group presentation is by the University of Texas on March 4. That could prove crucial, as UT has been cool to Capital Metro's earlier approaches. Should a new medical school affiliated with UT arise in Austin – as recommended in a study released Feb. 11 by the chamber and friends – UT's need for transit could increase, particularly if the med school were sited at Mueller or on its Brackenridge tract off Lake Austin Boulevard.

After the presentations conclude, the Transit Working Group will enter the more difficult phase of its charge. "Having a proposal by May that could make a fall election will be difficult," noted Janes. But like nearly all group members interviewed, he wanted to try. "I think we are making great progress, and I don't see any reason to slow down."

"I like the fact that everyone is willing to work this hard to try to get there," said Watson of a November referendum. "It's a strong goal of Mayor Wynn's, and I want to help him succeed. It's important to set time frames in Central Texas, because it helps this community move forward."

"I can't overstate the value that Senator Watson's chairmanship has created," said Wynn (clearly no stranger to logrolling as a smart transportation choice). Asked who should create an integrated regional passenger-rail system, Wynn said, "I see CAMPO as clearly the best entity to coordinate and approve the pieces." Most other members agreed, although some pointed to the Regional Mobility Authority as having wider jurisdiction and precisely that legislative mandate. Most saw Capital Metro in a more limited operational role, given its existing obligations, struggles, and fiscal challenges.

Watson is an ex officio member of the Transit Working Group; to date, he has stayed quietly out of sight and let Wynn run the show. But after the information-gathering phase ends in early March and the more difficult hammering out of consensual goals, priorities, and financial assessments gets under way, many working group members say they expect – indeed, are counting on – Watson to lend his famous deal-making leadership. "I'm ready to play a role, when and if the working group needs me – and I've been known to volunteer," Watson chuckled.

Hooking up all these disparate cars, to form a train of regional cooperation chugging forward in the same direction, remains a daunting charge – one sure to make the remaining group meetings lively. As Hays County's Barton observed of the work ahead, "Things will get a lot more interesting, before they get less so."