

The Impact of Regional Rail
Remarks by Panel Member Jim Skaggs
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Traffic congestion creates lack of mobility which is the greatest threat to our quality of life. Our current and, hopefully, future lifestyles are distinguished and facilitated by our ability to go where we want, when we want, in a reasonable and predictable time. Yet everyone feels the penalties of growing congestion and asks: “is there a better way?”

Well, there is and it has little to do with the 19th Century technology called rail transit. As a former NASA Apollo Program executive, I can assure you the solution is not rocket science but it is more sophisticated than reverting to a “Back to the Future” approach. We should go forward, not backward.

Proposals to add rail to our modal mix must be based on facts and not dreaming or nostalgia. Dallas demonstrated a responsible hierarchy of mobility investments by implementing an effective arterial network combined with a highway system incorporating special lanes for HOV/HOT and express buses. Only then did they invest in rail which, unfortunately, has not improved transit performance.

Austin has neither an effective arterial network, nor a completed highway system. It has no HOV/HOT and, therefore, little effective express bus service. Additionally, we, like other major high growth cities suffer from a funding crisis that could derail completing our basic road systems. Rail transit is getting the “cart before the horse”.

It is often said: “we need it all” and “we need alternatives” meaning extensive roads, buses, and trains. The problem is there is not enough money to “do it all” so we must pick the right alternatives. We must prioritize limited transportation dollars and spend them on the most cost effective projects within a total system. Otherwise, we decrease mobility for all citizens and reduce Austin’s desirability as a place to live and work. It will also be a major setback in our journey to achieve social equity.

Other cities provide overwhelming evidence that passenger rail in cities like Austin, or Austin 50 years from now, are not cost-effective, and will not measurably reduce congestion. Both US Government and private studies indicate passenger rail costs are many times bus costs and trains are inflexible. Buses can carry as many people as urban trains and buses are more cost-effective, faster, safer and more flexible. Las Vegas, a rapidly growing region like Austin, selected buses over trains to expand transit. In deciding against the recommendations of their contractor and citizens task force, the Regional Transportation Commissioner said, quote: "*-- we don't have unlimited funding. And we don't have the luxury of locking ourselves into a system that does not have flexibility.*"

Rail transit is bad for transit riders, especially low income, because it is so expensive most agencies building rail end up cutting bus service and increasing fares to pay for it. Atlanta, Los Angeles, San Jose, and San Francisco are among the many cities that lost more bus riders than they gained rail riders. Dallas, Portland, and Washington DC transit systems today carry a far smaller share of commuters than they did in 1980 because the cost of their rail systems led to neglected bus systems which carry a majority of transit riders.

Capital Metro proposes about 7 miles of double track for a streetcar powered by unsightly overhead electric wires similar to the streetcars which were removed from city streets more than 60 years ago – removed because they were not competitive with the bus. I have been told estimates of streetcar costs are about \$90 million. This is not a credible estimate and will result in major cost overruns as is being experienced in the commuter. Portland has the only similar US streetcar. It is one-half the length, cost more than \$25 million per mile and the ridership is very low on its Disney-like streetcar. A similar system in Austin would cost at least double the \$90 million and there would be major construction disruptions on downtown streets. Assuming Capital Metro's optimistic ridership and current cost projections, taxpayers will annually subsidize each initial rider from Leander to Austin with almost \$25,000.

Portland, after spending billions with huge cost overruns on rail, had a smaller percentage of people using transit for work trips in 2000

than in 1980. Of 23 US cities with rail in 2003, thirteen lost transit ridership over the previous 20 years and nine had transit ridership growth but less growth than automobiles. Only one city, San Diego, had slight growth in transit market share. Many of these cities' bus systems enjoyed much greater success prior to implementing rail. It is rarely debated anymore that low ridership on passenger trains has no measurable impact on congestion in cities like Austin. Congestion is often made worse by running in streets, crossing streets and generally diverting resources from things which can reduce congestion. The streetcar has all these downsides.

Often rail proponents claim increased opportunities for development to justify the enormous cost and taxpayer subsidies for rail. Competent third part studies dispute significant net tax benefit to cities due to development subsidized by rail transit. Portland, for example, has provided hundreds of millions in tax abatements and waivers to developers to build near tracks because the market did not support it. And, today, Portland's basic services of Police, Fire, Schools and Libraries are all suffering.

Austin is one of the Nation's fastest growing regions and none of it due to subsidized rail. Do developers really need taxpayer funded rail subsidies? Even Capital Metro's consultants project tax benefits much less than the subsidized rail costs. Recent local tax supported deals such as Samsung, Hewlett-Packard, Home Depot Data Center and The Domain were not based on tax subsidized rail transit but were almost undone by lack of highways and growing traffic congestion.

As is readily apparent in discussing a comprehensive rail system, Capital Metro does not have funding to build it. Other governmental entities should not share rails' huge, unpredictable cost liabilities, with little benefit for citizens, and in the face of many unmet, priority needs. It is also readily apparent from CAMPO's 2030 Plan, the region does not have funding to build the road network that is more effective at moving goods and people. We have limited funds. We must prioritize, select cost effective systems and demand accountability.

Many rail proponents, having lost every other argument, have resorted to claiming questionable links between rail investments, land use, radically altered lifestyles and economic investment. Any

objective look at the evidence would question a shift to passenger rail investment under the best circumstances. But, the state of our transportation system makes it absolutely foolhardy to look at rail technology until our road systems are funded. We should not divert more funding from failing road systems we know will work and chase dreams that will not work. This rail proposal is untimely, unsound and unsupported.

We loose absolutely nothing and have much to gain by insisting the Leander commuter be completed and evaluated for at least two years prior to voting to expand rail. In 2004, Chairman Walker suggested: *“high frequency circulating shuttle buses in the downtown, Capital, University of Texas area and at -- the Mueller airport redevelopment site.”* I believe this is a responsible, effective concept which would cost less than ten percent of the streetcar plan. It will serve the community’s greater good and should not be replaced with streetcars.

Thank you

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