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Woods: Red Line review works, outside ideas welcome

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The lead spokesman for the Red Line Regional Rail Project said Tuesday that the contentious debate of recent weeks is “exactly what we want to see” as officials seek input and revise a business plan for the proposed \$452 million rail line. John Woods, who is Davidson’s mayor and chair of the Red Line Task Force, also told a small gathering of reporters at Davidson Town Hall that outside analysis by people from other parts of the country is welcome, but final decisions about the project ultimately must be made by local leaders concerned how “to best enhance our community.”

Listen to Mr. Woods’s remarks and a Q&A with reporters below.

Mr. Woods said this week’s meetings come in the second month of a planned three-month process in which leaders and consultants are seeking feedback on proposed governance and financial plans for the rail project. The back-and-forth between citizens, developers, property owners and elected officials is part of studying the project, he said.

“Our focus as neighbors working together ... is to study the potential for this major infrastructure and economic development effort. This process is working very well,” Mr. Woods said. “Now is the time to ask tough questions, to seek difficult answers of concern.”

Echoing remarks by consultants and other leaders recently, Mr. Woods said the goal of the three months of meetings is to identify concerns and revise the plan to come up with a consensus that can be put to a final vote by mid year.

“The questions and the issues that you see floating around in the community right now are exactly what we want to see,” Mr. Woods said Tuesday.

“We want our due diligence to help define and implement the best plan for our community,” he said.

His comments came on the eve of more community meetings about the project, including two on Wednesday that will feature an analysis of the project's business plan by Randal O'Toole, of the Cato Institute in Washington, D.C. Mr. O'Toole is an outspoken critic of rail, and is expected to be highly critical of the Red Line plan.

Mr. Woods did not mention Mr. O'Toole by name. But he said:
"Another signal of the importance of this project is the national attention that we are receiving, including visits from people from other parts of the country who are paid to provide their experiences. We greatly appreciate the view of others and acknowledge the need for this process. And at the end of the process, our elected leaders, with great input from citizens, will make the decisions to best enhance our community. So after listening to our visitors, we will go back to work as neighbors in meetings and discussions to ensure that we create the best system for our community, and not depend on visitors who don't know us."
Mr. O'Toole is scheduled to speak in a 9 a.m. meeting at Cornelius Town Hall and at the Lake Norman Transportation Commission Wednesday night in Mooresville. Read more about his visit and see a list of meetings this week
The Red Line would be a 25-mile freight and commuter rail line running from Mount Mourne to Charlotte. The project envisions upgrading existing tracks owned by Norfolk Southern. The project would be managed by a new regional authority that would include the N.C. Department of Transportation, Charlotte Area Transit System and area towns and county governments.

Consultants hired by the N.C. DOT have researched and written a business plan for the project. It calls for costs to be shared – 25 percent each by CATS and the N.C. DOT, and 50 percent from local governments.

The plan proposes that the towns could pay for the rail line by establishing "unified benefit districts" – collections of properties around the rail line whose values presumably would increase. As those values increase, that would generate additional tax revenue, and local governments are being asked to dedicate a portion of that new revenue to pay for the project. Meanwhile, owners of income-producing commercial properties along the line would be asked to voluntarily create special zones, and to pay special assessments above current property taxes that also would go toward the project costs.

Meanwhile, in response to a question, Mr. Woods on Tuesday also reiterated that the project needs to be a unanimous undertaking. If any one local or county government opts out, that's a "deal killer," he said.

[Audio]

FEB. 23 MEETING

Another meeting also has been announced, for Thursday, Feb. 23, at 3 p.m. at Huntersville Town Hall, to discuss public private partnerships. Mr. Woods said

such a partnership with a private investor potentially could pay for the entire project. In a Q&A on the RedLineRegionalRail.org project website, officials say such partnerships could include manufacturers, construction contractors, financial partners and others.

Here's the text of that question from the website:

A-15. Who are the top 5 companies, or teams of companies, expected to bid on the DBOM/DBFOM contract for the project? (Rick Short, Davidson)

We cannot comment at this time on who would bid on this contract, but can provide the following partial list of private companies who typically compete to participate in public-private partnerships for projects such as this one. This list is divided based on the type of role that each company typically plays; multiple companies could be involved for the Red Line.

- Vehicle manufacturers: Alstom; Ansaldo/ Breda; Bombardier; CAF; Kawasaki; Siemens; Rotem/ Hyundai.
- Concessionaire/contractors (many also operate light rail systems on their own): ACS/ Hochtief/ Flatiron; Acciona; Balfour Beatty (Rail) who have been conflicted out for this project; Bechtel; Bouygues; Fluor; GlobalVia; SNC Lavalin; Skanska; Vinci.
- Financial Equity: InfraRed; Laing; Meridiam; Uberior (Lloyds Bank).
- Operators: ACI; Herzog; National Express; Serco; Stagecoach; Veolia.