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## *More scrutiny for Red Line biz plan at meetings this week*

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It's a busy week for meetings about the proposed **Red Line Regional Rail Project**. Mooresville's Red Line Review Committee meets Tuesday morning. And what could turn out to be dueling meetings are scheduled Wednesday at Cornelius Town Hall – one with an anti-rail expert from the Cato Institute and another featuring a panel discussion with large property owners who support the project. Meanwhile, owners of property in downtown Davidson along the rail line have been invited to a Wednesday afternoon meeting explaining how the proposed financing would work.

Consultants for the Red Line Task Force and N.C. Department of Transportation say the meetings are all part of the process of gathering feedback on the proposed financial plan for the \$452 million project. "We're looking for revisions," consultant Katherine Henderson said Monday.

So far, plenty of people have turned out at other public meetings to state their concerns about the project, from whether taxes will go up to whether any businesses might be interested in locating special freight-oriented districts along the line.

Mooresville's Red Line Review Committee will meet Tuesday morning. Their agenda will include a Q&A with the consultants, a discussion about tax and special assessment districts that are proposed in Mooresville and south Iredell to help pay for the rail line, and discussions of taxes, governance and the proposed financial plan. Don Bartell is chair of the committee, which includes a mix of citizens, elected officials and business people.

### **WEDNESDAY MEETINGS**

Wednesday's meetings in Cornelius are expected to present two differing views of the rail project.

At 9 a.m. at Cornelius Town Hall, Randal O'Toole of the Cato Institute will present an analysis of the Red Line business and finance plan. Mr. O'Toole is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute who studies urban growth, public land and transportation issues. The Cato Institute is a public policy research organization that describes itself as "dedicated to the principles of individual liberty, limited government, free markets and peace."

Mr. O'Toole is the author of the 2001 book "The Vanishing Automobile and Other Urban Myths" and a new volume titled "Gridlock: Why We're Stuck in Traffic and What to Do About It," which outlines his ideas for a more effective transportation system. He also has authored numerous articles and studies, including a 2010 report for Cato titled ["Defining Success: The Case against Rail Transit."](#)

After that meeting, which could include members of the Cornelius Rail Task Force and local town boards, the Red Line Task Force of the Metropolitan Transit Commission will host a meeting in part to respond to Mr. O'Toole's comments as well as to present the perspective of developers along the line who favor the project. The panel discussion will include Cornelius Mayor Jeff Tarte, consultant Mark Briggs, Brad Howard of Langtree Development and John Markham.

Then on Wednesday afternoon at 3 o'clock at Davidson Town Hall, property owners and business owners in downtown Davidson have been invited to a meeting where they can ask questions and share their thoughts about the proposed Red Line financing plan. That plan includes a proposal to create Special Assessment Districts along the rail line. Owners of income-producing properties only would be asked to vote on whether to create such districts. If a majority agree, their income-producing properties would be subject to a new tax or fee on top of regular property taxes.

That piece of the financing package calls for property owners in these SADs, as they're being called, to pay a fee or surcharge of 75 cents per \$100 of assessed value, beginning in 2013. The line would not open until 2017 or 2018, but Red Line supporters say the money is needed up front to help pay for construction.

Property owners might be willing to pay the extra fee, according to consultants, because of the potential benefits they'd derive from the rail line – higher property values, more demand for office and retail space from businesses and increased retail traffic.

Some small business owners and property owners already have expressed concern. We looked at a sample of buildings along main streets in Davidson and Cornelius and found that some property owners were hit last year with increases in value – and taxes – of 60 percent or more. As proposed, the special assessments would boost what they pay again by another 50 to 60 percent.

Critics of the Red Line project have suggested that the new fees or assessments could break the backs of small businesses, and force some to close. Ms. Henderson said Monday that feedback could lead to changes in the plan:

"We have heard a lot of concern about the impact of the special assessment as proposed, especially on small businesses. This feedback is very important to the project team and we are working on a few changes to the assessment methodology to help resolve these concerns," Ms. Henderson said.

"Hearing input like this is the main purpose of the current review period, which was designed to solicit comment from all stakeholders," she added.

Ms. Henderson, of KKH Consulting in Raleigh, said the final boundaries of the special tax districts, are still being developed. She said the consultants expect to release "parcel-level information," including maps showing all the district details, by the end of February, for discussion and further feedback.

#### **RED LINE MEETINGS THIS WEEK**

##### **TUESDAY, FEB. 7**

**7:30 a.m.**, Ten O'Clock Charlie's, Water Tower Center, 455 E. Plaza Drive, Mooresville – Topic: Red Line Regional Rail Project. 704-664-6464

**9:30-10:30 a.m.**, Mooresville Town Hall, meeting room 3211, 413 N. Main St., Mooresville – Public Q&A on the Red Line Regional Rail Project. Followed 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. by a meeting of the Mooresville Red Line Review Committee. Download a [copy of the agenda](#). PDF. More information: <http://redlineregionalrail.org/>

**11:45-1:15 p.m.**, The Range, 10913 Bailey Road, Cornelius – Lake Norman Regional Economic Development Corp. hosts an Industry Roundtable Luncheon about the Red Line. With presentation by consultants Mark Briggs and Katherine Henderson.

##### **WEDNESDAY, FEB. 8**

**9 a.m.**, Cornelius Town Hall, 21445 Catawba Ave., Cornelius – Red Line presentation and public forum, with Randall O'Toole of Cato Institute, who will present an analysis of the Red Line business and finance plan. Read more about the meeting and Mr. O'Toole and link to articles he has written on the [Cornelius Town website](#).

**11 a.m.**, Community Room, Cornelius Town Hall, 21445 Catawba Ave., Cornelius – The public is invited to a panel discussion on the Red Line Regional Rail project. Cornelius Mayor Jeff Tarte, consultant Mark Briggs, Brad Howard of Langtree Development and John Markham will share their views on the draft business-finance plan currently under review by all participating jurisdictions. Red Line project consultants will also be on hand to answer technical questions and respond to statements about the Draft Plan made by Randal O'Toole of the Cato Institute.

**3 to 5 p.m.**, Davidson Town Hall, 216 S. Main St., Davidson – Special meeting of Davidson property owners to discuss the Red Line project. Open to the public. The Red Line Rail Project consultants will discuss the financial implications of the Red Line to businesses in Davidson. They will review tax increment financing and special assessment district financing.

**6:30 p.m.**, Mooresville Town Hall, Main Street, Mooresville – The next meeting of the Lake Norman Regional Transportation Commission will feature a presentation by Bjorn Hansen, transportation program coordinator with the Centralina Council of Governments, on the Regional Freight Mobility Study; and Randall O'Toole of the CATO Institute will have a presentation on the draft business and finance plan for the Red Line Regional Rail Project. Information: Call 704-604-5057 or visit [www.lakenormantrans.org](http://www.lakenormantrans.org).