

THE AUSTIN CHRONICLE

A Great Big Bundle of Rail and Roads

Council moves transportation bonds toward a November vote

By Mac McCann
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The train is about to leave the station, and the rubber is meeting the road.

At its meeting today (Thursday, Aug. 7), City Council is expected to discuss, and likely vote to approve, a transportation bond package, with specific bond language for the Nov. 4 ballot. Barring surprises, the proposal will likely track the Strategic Mobility Plan (SMP) that Council unanimously endorsed on June 26 (see "Council on Transportation: Pondering the Bond," Aug. 1).

The bond package, based on the SMP, would (over its term) cost an estimated \$1 billion, with \$400 million for road improvements and \$600 million for urban rail. The \$600 million would cover a little less than half of Project Connect's \$1.38 billion Central Corridor Urban Rail project (aka the "Locally Preferred Alternative"). Ideally, the Federal Transportation Administration is expected to match the city's funding for the project. Council Member Mike Martinez told the *Chronicle* last week that the official ballot language is expected to be conditional, so as to "preclude the City Council from spending any funds on urban rail until we've received a federal match ... on the project" – a match that wouldn't be confirmed until 2017 or 2018, though the road projects could be started regardless.

The Big Picture

Project Connect's LPA, as endorsed by Council and the Capital Metro board of directors, would run a total of 9.5 miles, from Riverside/Grove on East Riverside, across a proposed new bridge over Lady Bird Lake, up Trinity Street in Downtown, through the UT-Austin campus via San Jacinto Boulevard, up Red River to the Hancock Center, and through a tunnel at Hancock before following Airport Boulevard to ACC Highland. The route would have 16 stations and four Park & Rides (two north, two south). Project Connect planners estimate that by 2030 the completed LPA would serve 16,000-20,000 daily riders, adding nearly 10,000 new transit riders to the system. In addition to the construction's \$1.38 billion construction cost, Project Connect estimates an additional \$22 million annually for operations and maintenance.

The details of the \$400 million in proposed road projects are still to be confirmed by Council action, but the SMP describes projects primarily along I-35, as well as corridor studies elsewhere. For a summary of those projects, see "Council on Transportation," Aug. 1.

The Campaign Begins

Once the bond proposal is made official, the campaigns – for and against – will officially begin. Under state law, the planners who designed the project (as public employees) can provide explanatory and educational materials, but cannot directly advocate for the project. Proponents who aren't restricted by state law – including various advocacy groups currently organizing and raising money, as well as policymakers such as Mayor Lee Leffingwell, who has made this project the final priority of his tenure – have begun beefing up their promotional efforts. Similarly, opponents ranging from rail-rejectionists, to property tax-cutters, to transit advocates who disapprove of this particular routing, will be advocating accordingly.

In June, following the Central Corridor Advisory Group's adoption of the plan, the Capital Metro Board endorsed the urban rail recommendation. Additionally, according to its press release, the Cap Metro board "opted to include language to include planning for a possible future extension to Austin-Bergstrom International Airport in the next phase of urban rail planning," along with the already noted possible future extensions in the East Austin, Mueller, and Lamar "subcorridors" (the latter a particularly contentious element).

In support of the proposal, Cap Metro press releases have noted the anticipated population growth around the urban rail route, which "currently has more than 46,000 people living within a half-mile, and more than 90,000 people working within a half-mile of the route. The proposal is expected to have almost 90,000 people living within a half-mile of the route and more than 132,000 people working within that same area by 2030, with an estimated average daily ridership of 18,000 in the same year."

The Project Connect team has also estimated that the \$1.38 billion capital investment – with local construction and professional services earning \$880 million – would result in an economic impact of \$1.6-2.4 billion, and 27,000-33,000 direct and indirect jobs. (Less conservative industry models, planners added, calculate more than \$3.6 billion in economic impact.) More broadly, the planners estimate that subsequent economic development could mean an additional \$31.6-44.4 million in property tax revenue, \$5.9-10.8 million in sales taxes, and \$6.3-9.1 billion in new building value.

Some opponents have argued that the expense of rail will inevitably force a reduction in bus service. Cap Metro Communications Specialist John Julitz replied in an email, "There are no plans to reduce bus or any other transit service in order to fund the operation of this first urban rail line." And in the longer term, he said, both the Project Connect: North Corridor plan and the Capital Metro Service 2025 plan "call for increased bus service."

Considering that Austin continues to be one of the fastest-growing metro areas in the country, supporters have emphasized the importance of viewing the proposal in its larger context. While we've used the term "Project Connect" to refer specifically to the Central Corridor urban rail project, the entire Project Connect plan actually addresses the Central Texas region as a whole. Julitz says the proposal should be seen in this wider context – not as the *only* investment in urban rail, but simply the *first* investment in urban rail. It "will bring new riders to the entire system, and at the same time provide additional choices for people looking for options."

Bundling Up for Decongestion

Leffingwell acknowledged that increased taxes are never popular, but believes the investment will be worth it – even for those who don't plan to use rail directly. In 2014, Austin was named the fourth most congested metropolitan area in the U.S., according to Inrix, a national transportation research firm. Most Austinites are intimately aware of the congestion problems, the mayor said, and, if nothing is done, that congestion will only get worse, leaving the city to deal with "the current trend projected indefinitely into the future – growing congestion and declining quality of life."

Similarly, Martinez commented, "The congestion and transportation issues that we have in Austin didn't happen overnight, and they're not going to go away overnight. We have to have a multimodal approach to deal with all of these issues." In that context, Martinez emphasized the importance of including road investments in the proposal as well.

There have been early complaints – from road supporters and rail supporters – that this "bundling" is inherently unfair, although virtually every bond package on the ballot exhibits some version of bundling, to broaden the potential appeal. And as we reported last week, bundling road improvements into the rail proposal appears to have earned the support of the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce's board of directors. Chamber Senior Vice President Jeremy Martin called the addition of road improvements "very important, because the No. 1 thing we hear from Chamber members is that we need to improve traffic congestion, and the Chamber has long supported a multimodal approach to improving regional mobility. ... It's important that we pursue mobility improvements in a systemic fashion. There's no one single project that will fix traffic, and the improvements are needed citywide." Referring indirectly to the length of time required to realize the rail project, Martin added, "Presenting improvements that everyone can see in their daily lives is very important."

For plan supporters, combining the rail proposal with road investments is an obvious strategy. Jeb Boyt, chair of the Alliance for Public Transportation (APT) and a supporter of the proposal, noted that bundling road and rail together in a transportation bond is pretty standard, and experience has shown that in general, bundled bonds are more successful on the ballot.

Not everyone agrees. Public transit advocates Scott Morris and Lyndon Henry, who strongly oppose this particular plan, issued a press release in late June denouncing how the LPA had been "hastily bundled with hundreds of millions of dollars of highway projects to increase support and private funding for the rail's planned political campaign." They said they "oppose combining an urban rail decision with unrelated highway infrastructure that would be otherwise unneeded with a good rail plan."

In addition to the Chamber and APT, other groups have expressed support for the plan, including Austin Gets Around, the Downtown Austin Alliance, the Downtown Austin Neighborhood Association, the Central Texas chapter of the Congress for a New Urbanism, and the Let's Go Austin PAC. According to a mid-July press release, Let's Go Austin, formed in March to support the bond proposal, has already raised more than \$73,000. PAC treasurer Greg Hartman said the PAC "intends to raise at least \$500,000" over the next few months leading up to the election. They've added PR muscle to help make that happen – Lynda Rife has been hired to be the PAC's campaign manager, and she said the group is on track to meet its fundraising goal.

Both sides of the debate recognize that the plan's cost – and consequently, tax increases – could hinder public support. By some estimates, the average Austin homeowner will pay about \$180 more in annual property taxes if the bond is passed. Boyt admitted, "Right now, there's a lot of concern in the community about taxes, especially with home values going up, with no end in sight." However, Boyt emphasizes the price of a missed opportunity: "The cost of not doing something is huge."

Supporters argue that the plan is clearly worth the investment: For \$180 a year – \$15 more a month in taxes on the average home – voters can get a system that could offer additional transportation options and alleviate congestion even for those that won't use the system. They argue that if the proposal is rejected, voters "save" \$15 a month – but at a cost of perpetuating and steadily exacerbating congestion problems. As Martin put it, "We just can't afford to say no."

On the Other Hand ...

Opponents remain unconvinced. In an op-ed for the *Statesman*, AURA co-chair Marcus Denton notes that "many of the city's staunchest public transportation proponents oppose the road-rail bond package as a threat to the city's transportation future and a setback for walkable urbanism in Austin." (AURA was formerly an acronym for "Austinites for Urban Rail Action," but now just calls itself a "land use and transportation advocacy group.") Denton objected to the \$400 million in road projects, quoting Project Connect's initial position – "building roads only encourages more single occupancy vehicle use and increases congestion and pollution" – and argued that they would override any benefits of the rail investment. Denton supports public transit, but considers the current rail proposal "the wrong route, selected for the wrong reasons." Henry of Austin Rail Now (another small transit advocacy group) calls the proposal a "meandering senseless route." One of the proposal's "gigantic problems," he says, is that it "raises tax rates to put urban rail in the wrong place."

According to AURA and Our Rail, the more western Guadalupe/Lamar corridor – which was preferred in 2000 – should be the "top priority for building the city's first urban rail alignment" (from an Our Rail press release). For these opponents, Guadalupe/Lamar isn't just the best option; it's the *only* option. Our Rail has stated that the group "opposes a Project Connect ballot measure containing any mass transit investment that threatens the future development of urban rail in the Guadalupe/North Lamar Corridor."

It's not certain if that targeted opposition has staying power. In April, the Central Austin Community Development Corporation's "I want to ride LIGHT RAIL on Guadalupe/North Lamar!" petition passed 1,000 signatures. (The CACDC is another small advocacy group with a grandiose name.) As of July 29, the names had reached 1,092. It's difficult to determine whether those initial Guadalupe/Lamar corridor supporters will come to support the current proposal, or if, like Our Rail, they're supportive of *only* the G/L investment.

These critics fear that the plan's "high cost will hinder and constrain future rail development," such as potential investments in Guadalupe/Lamar. As vehement opponent Mike Dahmus argued to the *Chronicle* in April, "If that's the next line that we'll build, we will not get a chance to build Guadalupe/Lamar ever, and we will not get a chance to build another rail line somewhere else for 20, 30, or even 40 years." Denton called the proposal "worse than doing nothing."

Early in the planning process, the Guadalupe/Lamar corridor appeared to be the front-runner. UT's Student Government General Assembly endorsed the Guadalupe/Lamar subcorridor on the west side of campus, convenient to the West Campus student population. Project Connect's own public outreach workshop surveys found that the Guadalupe/Lamar route consistently garnered a plurality and occasionally a majority of the public preference votes.

Mayor Leffingwell, however, says the Guadalupe/Lamar corridor ranked higher on planners' matrices than the chosen Highland corridor only when the process didn't take into account future growth. He said it would be "irresponsible" to plan for no growth. The planners' numbers reflect – when future growth is considered in the rankings – that the Highland corridor becomes the better investment.

Henry has written that the current plan works "not only to forsake Guadalupe-Lamar, but also to forsake the heart of the West Campus, with the 3rd-highest residential density in Texas, and its lively commercial activity." While forsaking West Campus, Henry says, "Austin taxpayers are expected to subsidize UT administrators' appetite for eastward expansion of the backwater East Campus with much lower density and less activity." However, Pat Clubb, UT Vice President and the university's representative on CCAG, has said that San Jacinto now divides the campus relatively equally – especially with the LBJ Library, Bass Concert Hall, Royal-Texas Memorial Stadium, and the under-construction medical school and its accompanying "innovation district."

Boyt recognizes the appeal of the G/L corridor, but said that it's currently being served (by the new Bus Rapid Transit) and that adding urban rail now would come with "some huge challenges and questions." Capital Metro board member John Langmore, who also served on CCAG, says that more of the community would likely be frustrated if the Guadalupe/Lamar *were* chosen as the first route than are currently frustrated that it *wasn't*. Few drivers would be happy with two or three years of construction cutting Lamar down to two lanes. And even if the city did want to invest in Guadalupe/Lamar rail, the MetroRapid on G/L has a 20-year FTA contract that Mayor Leffingwell insists "can't be undone." Project Connect lead Kyle Keahey said that that BRT investment won't even be evaluated by the FTA before accumulating two years of data – and the FTA wouldn't consider investing in the corridor for rail until the BRT's impact has been evaluated. While Keahey insists that G/L was a serious option all along in the process, he admits that planners couldn't risk upsetting the FTA – "the hand that feeds us" – which is expected ultimately to cover half of the rail project's cost.

It goes without saying that longtime anti-rail groups, most prominently the Coalition on Sustainable Transportation organized by former Tracor CEO Jim Skaggs, also reject this latest proposal. They routinely cite longtime rail opponent Randal O'Toole of the libertarian Cato Institute, who has argued that the city should instead invest in more buses: "For much less than the cost of a single fixed-guideway transit line serving a few travelers, Austin can both improve bus service and relieve traffic congestion for all travelers." More recently, the transportation bond has begun to be an issue in the 10-1 Council campaign, with some anti-tax candidates already denouncing it as "a boondoggle" and others hanging fire until the proposal becomes an actual ballot proposition. Leffingwell acknowledged that the current political context – including a spreading backlash against property taxes – is "a little scary," but says he remains "very confident" that the plan can win over the public in November.

Martinez said, "Not everyone is in agreement with 100 percent of this package. But I don't think we anticipated trying to get 100 percent agreement on any potential bond package. ... I'm optimistic that enough folks in our community understand the importance of these projects and will be supportive of them."

It will be interesting to see how most of the G/L supporters end up voting, and if the unlikely coalition of road warriors and disappointed transit advocates will be enough to kill the bond. Beyond November, Morris says he's confident that if the current plan is rejected, "The people are prepared to get back on the horse and get this pointed in the right direction" – i.e., building rail on Guadalupe/Lamar. Morris believes a new proposal could be prepared and presented to voters "in the 2016 time frame." That's an extraordinary optimism to rest on freshmen council members who, under this scenario, would have just been elected by voters who simultaneously rejected rail – not to mention recalling the checkered history of mass transit votes in Austin.

Leffingwell, recalling the narrowly defeated 2000 light rail plan – which initiated a stasis that persists to this day, 14 years later – thinks that should urban rail lose in November, the next opportunity might take another 14 years. He told the *Chronicle* in June, "There is no Plan B."