

San Antonio plans for light rail despite voter opposition

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Despite repeated defeats at the polls, a controversial light rail system remains in San Antonio's planning documents.

City officials say, "It is important not to rule out any method or mode of transportation."

National transportation expert Randal O'Toole retorts, "I suspect that they have ruled out dirigibles, helicopters and pod cars. Rail should be ruled out for the same reason: It is expensive and few will use it."

"It's not really about rail or offering commuters options, it's about rent-seeking developers looking for their next handout, courtesy of San Antonio taxpayers," said Terri Hall, founder of Texans Uniting for Reform and Freedom.

The city plan, dubbed San Antonio Tomorrow, envisions "dedicated rail alignments" along San Pedro Avenue from downtown to the airport and Stone Oak, along New Braunfels Street from the Pearl through downtown to Brooks City Base, and along Fredericksburg Road from downtown to the Medical Center to the University of Texas-San Antonio.

The planning document does not say how any of the projects would be funded, but the city is ramping up a campaign for an \$850 million bond issue next year, with the bulk of the funds generically earmarked for "transportation."

"In the future, our great residents and visitors will need options if mobility and quality of life is to be maintained," Mike Frisbie, the city's director of transportation and capital improvement, told Watchdog.org.

"Ultimately, the voters will decide whether or not light rail is implemented," he said.

Voters have already spoken on the topic multiple times.

After twice defeating rail projects, San Antonio voters last year passed a charter amendment requiring public approval to fund any future rail venture.

Undaunted, city officials cite Salt Lake City and Denver as places where voters rejected light-rail proposals prior to eventual implementation.

"In Salt Lake, once the north-south alignment was in operation, a demand for the east-west light rail from the airport to the university ensued," Frisbie said.

“In Phoenix, voters rejected light rail proposals until 2004. Now the 20-mile system from the heart of Phoenix, through downtown, past the ASU campus in Tempe to Mesa has tremendous ridership,” he added.

O’Toole said Salt Lake and Phoenix, the former post of San Antonio City Manager Sheryl Sculley, are “spending gobs of money on rail transit, yet they haven’t increased transit’s share of commuting and other travel.”

For a more cost-effective comparison, the Cato Institute transit expert urged San Antonio to look at another fast-growing Western city, which decided against rail.

“With buses only, Las Vegas doubled transit’s share of travel. In 1990, transit carried a higher percentage of travel in Salt Lake and Phoenix than in Las Vegas. Today, transit’s share is highest in Las Vegas,” O’Toole reported.

“The only reason cities build rail is there is a huge rail construction industry that promotes it,” he said.

Closer to home, Hall points to Austin, where just 0.075 percent of the metro population uses light rail.

A recent essay in Forbes magazine labeled that city’s Metro rail a “monument to government waste,” with each average daily roundtrip rider subsidized at roughly \$10,000 per year.

San Antonio Councilman Ron Nirenberg says, “We simply can’t just put more buses on already congested streets. We’ve got to leverage a new transit system. We’ve got to invest in a fixed route between high-density corridors.”

Frisbie told Watchdog: “It would be shortsighted not to show [rail] as an option in the SA Tomorrow Multimodal Transportation Plan.”

The city is advertising for a “visionary leader” to direct strategic planning for “passenger rail” and other transportation projects.

Hall, whose group fights to secure funding for crumbling urban roadways, says City Hall’s rail fetish would further burden taxpayers while benefiting political insiders.

“Planners and the politicians who enable them are trying to *create* auto congestion by implementing a ‘road diet’ in order to make auto options less attractive,” she charged.

A recent addition to the San Antonio comprehensive plan appears to grease the rails, with the city authorizing \$2.5 million to “develop incentives to encourage mixed-use development within a half-mile of stations in regional and urban centers along high-capacity transit corridors.”

Following the money, Hall concluded, “Special interests want the development tax breaks and government officials use the fixed-rail lines to incentivize development.”