



Both Sides Of The Red Line Track

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The vision for the Red Line is a commuter rail that would stretch 25 miles from Charlotte to Mooresville. A task force of elected officials has been working on a plan to get it up and running. The price tag of it would be \$452 million. The plan is now on tour stopping at town hall meetings and communities up and down the proposed line. Two of those meetings were held back-to-back Wednesday in Cornelius. They drew both supporters and skeptics.

The town hall's Community Room was buzzing with about 100 people when the first meeting began at 9 a.m. They were there to see a presentation by Randall O'Toole, a fellow from the conservative, public policy think tank CATO Institute.

He had been hired for \$1,000 by the town of Cornelius to assess the Red Line project for the Cornelius Rail Task Force. The exploratory group includes two town commissioners, two former mayors, and two developers. And it is clear that a number of them are opposed to the project.

O'Toole began by saying he's a self-described "rail nut." Still, he's opposed to rail line development.

"I've ended up opposing every rail line I've examined, not because I dislike trains, but because I haven't found any that are cost effective," he said. "As much as I enjoy riding trains, it doesn't mean I think that other people should subsidize my particular hobby."

From there, every slide and graph and photo in his hour-long presentation opposed the Red Line.

He argued that expanding the highways and implementing tolls would relieve more congestion than the rail line. He said that the proposed plan would be like "buses on rails" and that buying actual buses would be a far less costly project. He said development doesn't spring up automatically beside rail lines. It takes a lot of government subsidies and sometimes that still doesn't help.

O'Toole argued that cars are the cheaper way to go. He even went futuristic and showed a video of a self-driving car, saying they could greatly alleviate traffic congestion if they become part of the mainstream market.

Proponents of the Red Line project were not deterred by O'Toole's message. John Ong, an attorney from Iredell County, questioned O'Toole's objectivity during the Q&A portion of the meeting.

Afterward, he explained, "I wanted people to realize that he (O'Toole) is not a neutral expert. He's someone brought here purposefully to oppose a project."

One Meeting Down, One to Go

Ten minutes after the first meeting adjourned, the Red Line Task Force called its own meeting in the same room. That group, comprised of elected officials from each of the municipalities where the line would run, was formed by the Metro Transit Commission to come up with a finance plan for the project. Members of that Red Line Task Force support the project.

The meeting's purpose was to rebut O'Toole's presentation, and it partly did that. But it mainly became a forum for people to ask Mark Briggs, a representative from the development consulting firm Parsons Brinckerhoff, about financing.

The question of higher taxes kept coming up, especially from property owners near the proposed rail stations. Under the current plan, those who own commercial property within a half a mile of the proposed rail stations would be assessed a special tax: 75 cents per 100-dollars of assessed value.

Half of the business property owners in each of these areas would have to approve the tax for it to take effect on all of them within the half-mile radius. These are people and companies who actually own commercial properties, not just businesses leasing the space.

Red Line supporters argue that that wouldn't be a big sacrifice, since the rail line would be good for business and bring them customers they wouldn't get otherwise.

Later in the day, consultants working on the project committed to revising the financing plan by reducing assessments on properties that house small businesses and delaying assessments until the rail line is actually in operation. Specifics of these revisions still need to be decided.

But many people are simply wary of how the plan would work. A lot of property owners we talked to had concerns, but they worried being quoted would be bad for business. However, Bob McIntosh didn't have that worry. He has a law firm in Davidson and owns the building it's in.

"I think the people who are asking the questions are looking at hard dollars and cents and saying how are we going to pay for this and how is this going to benefit me," said McIntosh. "And I think those are the questions that are not being asked by the people who are promoting this plan."

All Not Quite Aboard

Another main point addressed by someone in the audience is the fact that Iredell County commissioners have said they are opposed to the project. This is significant because all five municipalities the line runs through and the Mecklenburg and Iredell County commissions must approve the plan (the five towns are Charlotte, Huntersville, Cornelius, Davidson and Mooresville).

In response, Cornelius Mayor Jeff Tarte acknowledged that Iredell's position is a problem.

"Iredell has said, 'No' and 'Hell no,' Tarte said, but added, "They didn't say 'Hell no, absolutely no way!'"

In other words, he believes there's time to sell Iredell commissioners on the project

Someone else asked about the fact that Norfolk Southern, the company that owns the rail line, has stated that it has major concerns with the project, including a \$500 million liability protection required for any commuter line operating on its tracks.

Again, Tarte put on a positive spin. He noted that Norfolk Southern has a representative at Task Force meetings. To Tarte, this means that Norfolk Southern is interested in developing the Red Line, not that it's only monitoring political discussions and decisions by having someone attend the meetings.

Several who attended the meeting came with their minds already made up. And by the end of the two meetings, nothing had changed. For those who just wanted to hear more about the plan, they may have walked away with more questions, than answers.

Including a man from Cornelius who left muttering, "How am I going to process all of this?"