



Transportation

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Cobb rail gathers steam

By [Craig Kootsillas](#), Marietta Homeowners Examiner

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Rail continues to gather steam as it approaches two major funding decisions: next year's TSPLOST election and the fight for federal funding.

Recent news reports [suggest](#) that support for rail is growing having just squeaked out a narrow victory over "rebuild the Wind Hill/I-75 interchange and trounced "none of the above" in a recent unusual three way match-up.

In addition, the Cobb Chamber of Commerce recently presented what they consider to be "[the business case for rail](#)."

Federal funding is expected to be a large component of the rail project, which is made available through the Federal Transit Administration's [New Starts](#) program.

The last time "New Starts" funding was sought for rail in the Atlanta region ([GRTA's NWCS](#)), [three options](#) were chosen after years of study - one being rail.

However, [the rail plan was not chosen](#) as the final locally preferred option.

The NWCS rail plan was the most expensive alternative (cost per ride as well as well as cost to build), and offered the longest commute time of the final three alternatives.

On one major segment of the proposed route (Cumberland to Midtown) rail doubled the commute times of both alternatives.

The NWCS decision, though, was made under Bush administration rules that included a mandate that federal transportation programs be judged to be at least "medium" in terms of cost-effectiveness.

At the time, cost-effectiveness was [defined as](#):

- the incremental cost of the project divided by its hours of transportation system user benefits compared to the baseline. It is reported in units of dollars per hour. Cost is defined as the annualized capital cost plus annual operating and maintenance costs.
- Transportation system user benefit is defined as all annual travel-related benefits in terms of hours for all users of the transit system (both existing riders and new riders).

Although rail didn't make the final cut under the Bush administration, the rules are different under the Obama

administration which recently cast aside many of Bush's policies.

Last January, US Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood [announced](#) a policy shift where transportation projects would be funded "based on [livability issues](#) such as economic development opportunities and environmental benefits, in addition to cost and time saved, which are currently the primary criteria."

The move was [welcomed](#) by the transportation industry and numerous advocacy groups ([see item 2](#)).

In a statement issued at the time, American Public Transportation Association President William Millar wrote,

"This new policy will rescind budget restrictions issued by the previous administration that focused primarily on 'cost effectiveness' (i.e. how much a project shortened commute times in comparison to cost) and now recognizes the wide-range of benefits that public transportation provides. We are very pleased that the DOT will now give consideration to the multiple benefits of new transit projects such as economic development, environmental impact, and land use improvements."

The move was not without its critics from those on the right side of the political spectrum, such as the [Cato Institute](#), [Reason Foundation](#) and others.

Critics bemoaned the fact that "New Starts" was one of the last surviving federal programs with even a half-hearted attempt at cost accountability and the new policy allowed shortcomings in revenue to be offset by guesses of what rail will bring.

This is possible given that the new policy allows a low score in cost-effectiveness to be countered by a high score in land use. While cost-effectiveness is measured by "hard" numbers, land-use scores typically involve the projection of an amount of revenue expected to be realized from implementation of the project.

The local funding decision will be made by voters in next year's TSPLOST election.

The existing [Cobb transportation study](#) is a critical step in the federal funding process. The study will select the locally preferred alternative from four existing plans (only two include rail) and will form the basis of the application for funding of the selected alternative.

The study is expected to conclude within 18 to 24 months.

Author's note....

Next, I'll take a look at the four alternatives Cobb DOT will be choosing from. I'll put the routes into Google STREETVIEW so you can see the proposed routes. Given the strings normally attached to New Starts funding ([See item 2](#)) people in the projected path may want to be prepared.

I'll take a look at properties along the route and we'll revisit some old stories in a new perspective.

I'll also tell you about the history of light rail in Cobb and will share many links with you so you'll be able to read

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the underlying documents.

One of the routes being considered is from GRTA's NWCS study which discarded rail as a viable option. You'll want to know about that one.

At the time, some judged it to be one of the most cost-effective traffic solutions in the nation.

Was it just a happy circumstance of funding opportunities and near-complete projects, or was it a real "Vienna moment" when a group of individuals get together and combine intellect to create something very interesting...

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