

Commuter Rail Study Comments Received Via Email

As a daily Pearland-to-Downtown Houston commuter, I frequently travel either Telephone Road (Highway 35) or the Gulf Freeway. I would strongly support the idea of commuter rail along Highway 35 from Pearland (Alvin) to Downtown Houston. Could this effort be combined (even share right-of-way) with completion of the "Alvin Freeway" (extension of Spur 5 from OST southward to BW-8)? Would also provide easy access from Alvin/Pearland to University of Houston main campus.

Sincerely,
David Griffith
Pearland

Good afternoon,

The questions submitted to you by Linda Mercer below are extensive, but do bring up significant issues that need to be addressed before moving forward. My understanding is each and every question submitted to you during the comment period of this study needs to be addressed and responded to before moving forward.

I would like to formally request that when the below questions are responded to that a copy of your response is sent to Senator Mario Gallegos, Jr. for his review.

We would greatly appreciate it and look forward to your response.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me.

Respectfully,

Ruben Landa
Legislative Assistant
Senator Mario Gallegos, Jr.
District 6

Dear Commuter Rail Connectivity Project Team:

Below please find some questions we have regarding the commuter rail study recommendations. We look forward to learning more about the potential for transit expansion in Houston. We also remain hopeful that impacted urban and suburban neighborhoods will generally support the final recommendations, once those are made. The current recommendations regarding 290 elements inside loop 610 cause us particular concern.

Submitted by Linda Mercer, President, Cottage Grove Civic Club Inc.

1. Will the commuter routes provide transit alternatives to urban commuters?
2. Will the commuter routes provide transit alternatives to suburban commuters?
3. How frequently will commuter trains leave the station?
4. When will the last commuter trains leave transit centers?
5. What will be the distance between stops?
6. How many cars are in a commuter train?
7. How many passengers does a commuter train carry?
8. What improvements and amenities can existing transit users expect from proposed commuter rail service over existing commuter bus service?
9. Will proposed or priority alignments provide transit routes where no transit options are currently present?
8. Can proposed transit changes on each corridor be described in terms of the different amount of times, ticket price, departure points or destinations?
9. How will the priority commuter routes connect suburban commuters with job centers?
10. What is the level of carbon emission per passenger mile from diesel powered engines?
11. How does the level of carbon emissions from FRA compliant rail equipment compare with other types of rail equipment and with commuter buses?
12. Is any City of Houston right-of-way inside loop 610 included in the commuter rail plans?
14. The City of Houston owned M-K-T corridor is being planned and constructed into a green linear corridor of mobility trails. How will the proposed 290 commuter rail inside the loop and the Eureka yard Storage and Maintenance facility impact the M-K-T acreage between Yale and Hempstead?

15. How will the proposed commuter rail impact the TxDOT owned M-K-T west of Hempstead to 610?
16. How does Eureka Yard play a role in the proposed 290 commuter rail corridor? Please describe the hours and level of anticipated activity.
17. The commuter rail plan discussed at the July 1 public meeting did not show Eureka Yard as part of the base system plan, but the documents presented at the H-GAC June 27 Transportation Policy Council meeting did show Eureka Yard would play a role and be expanded from its current size. Why were the details omitted from the documents used during the July 1 public meeting?
18. How many trains will cross Kansas street to enter the M-K-T for either staging or for traveling thru the corridor?
19. Much of the acreage around the Eureka Yard is in varying stages of new home-owner occupancy and high-density residential redevelopment. Will the commuter rail yard maintenance and storage facility require more acreage than is currently occupied by Union Pacific and its Eureka Yard customers? If the yard is expanded, will there be a negative or positive impact on adjacent property values?
20. The Eureka Yard has a connections to TC Jester and to the M-K-T. Could there be a local transit stop instead of a maintenance facility at Eureka?
21. What information can be provided about alternative maintenance and storage facilities were considered in the study? Can maintenance and storage be incorporated within the NW Mall site plan, or at the suburban terminal facilities instead of at Eureka Yard?
22. The proposed right of way commitments inside loop 610 use the same alignments as the light rail alternatives mapped during the inner Katy Corridor study. Will riders be able to transfer from commuter rail to light rail at the northwest transit center? Will riders be able to board trains inside loop 610? Is it possible to expedite a light rail route along

Washington Avenue north of IH 10 given TxDOT's current expansion plans for that section of roadway?

23. What are the anticipated environmental impacts of elevated structures and what mitigation measures are being planned? Are other elevated grade separations proposed inside the 610 loop besides the freight rail road flyover referenced on Yale street?
24. Can commuter rail planners be required to evaluate tunneled or below-grade alternatives for shared freight and commuter alignments inside loop 610?
25. Who has the authority to build and finance commuter rail routes in Harris County?
26. Who has the authority to build and finance commuter rail routes in the H-GAC counties?
27. Will commuter buses and commuter rail services compete for riders in the 290 corridor?
28. Will you invite Super Neighborhood 22 council members to planning meetings regarding using the Terminal and Eureka Subdivisions for new purposes?
29. Will Cottage Grove, Hidden Lakes, Timbergrove homeowners be impacted by an expansion and conversion of Eureka yard into a commuter train maintenance and storage facility?
30. The study conclusions indicate they were drawn extensively from the TxDOT Regional Freight Rail Study. The TxDOT regional freight rail study recommends closing most of the at-grade crossings and constructing elevated roadway bridges in the Terminal Subdivision. Have public comments regarding the TxDOT study recommendations been addressed in the regional freight rail study or in the commuter rail connectivity study?
31. The 290 corridor has commuter buses, and plans for toll roads, managed lanes, freeway expansion and a toll road connecting 290 to IH 10 along SH 99. Will the MPO provide a summary of the 290 related implementation timelines, budgets and forecasted ridership for the various plans and transit options?
32. The 249 route is listed in the baseline system plan. Would the 249 commuter rail connect to METRO's light rail?
33. Can you provide more information about the role and alignments of the transit circulator systems that encircle urban districts and connect to in-street light rail?
34. Where will planned transit circulator systems be implemented and what agency will operate them?
35. Why does the report include baseline system alignment forecasts and costs for SH 3 and US 290 but not the three other baselines in the system plan: SH 249, South Fort Bend Alternative, SH 35 Toll way?
36. Forecasts and costs for Westpark, 90A/Glidden and Hardy Road toll/Palestine are provided but are the routes included in the baseline system plan?
37. If 290 commuter rail is implemented in the near term, what options will riders have to connect from the NW transit center or NW mall to the CBD and other employment centers?
38. What storm water quality measures are considered and taken when commuter rail trains, storage yards and maintenance facilities operate in urban and suburban settings?
39. What environmental impacts other than storm water quality are measured and considered? Can you provide information about the environmental standards and responsible authorities?
40. When and where was the first H-GAC commuter rail connectivity study public meeting held?

July 29, 2008

Public comment for H-GAC commuter rail study

On July 1, 2008, the Houston Galveston Area Council offered up a commuter rail plan for public comment. The plan, which involves building or rehabilitating some five rail corridors, with an

estimated price tag of \$3 billion – a figure that is most likely to go much higher than that – and which is projected to carry 40,000 riders, is another example of how public policy has been warped by decisions laid down by the U.S. Congress in Washington. 40,000 riders represents the equivalent number of passengers carried by some two lanes of Houston area freeways, but whose capital outlay would equal that of an entire freeway. Would be passengers are not being even asked to pay 50 percent of envisioned operating costs. Primarily, this plan should be seen only as a way of politically capturing capital grants funded by Washington via the Federal Transit Administration 5307 and 5309 programs, which themselves are funded by by the approximately one in six dollars of gasoline taxes paid for by truck and automobile drivers, but which will not be used for road improvements or maintenance.

Rail, as a technology for moving people and goods, has a long and storied history. Developed in the early 19th century and which has seen a series of refinements that have centered on producing more powerful engines, rail lines have moved untold tons of freight and billions of people around the world throughout the last 175 years. Until the early 20th century, railroads were the unchallenged kings of transportation, having overthrown earlier overland modes of travel such as movement by canals and by horse drawn stagecoaches and wagons. Indeed the grip of railroads in the late 19th century was so great that they helped inspire America's first antitrust laws. A legacy of those laws continues in the form of the Texas Railroad Commission, whose original purpose of regulating railroads disappeared long ago.

In the world of the economic markets, as opposed to the world of political markets, a very important distinction, rail is a technology that relies on immense economies of scale in order to be effective as a means of movement in the competitive marketplace. For example, Union Pacific railroad (UP), a company whose Houston area representative was in attendance at the H-GAC public meeting noted above, is a company which according to its published reports available on its website, in 2007 had revenues of \$16.2 billion. The company possesses over 50,000 freight cars, leases 44,000 more, which carried 9.7 million carloads of freight in 2007 over more than 32,000 route miles (and 18,000 other yard miles). UP transported 1.052 trillion gross ton miles of freight in 2007, a staggering figure, and made \$1.85 billion in profit doing so. UP invested over \$3 billion in maintaining the company's existing track infrastructure and in adding new track mileage. UP is capable of making over 10 percent profit moving goods in the free market economy at a rate of some 16 cents per ton mile (about 30 cents per revenue ton mile), a rate that according to the Bureau of Transportation Statistics is over 80 percent cheaper than costs at the turn of the 20th century.

And yet, it is notable that UP, nor any other privately held railroad, is not terribly interested in getting into the business of transporting people, rather than goods. On the other hand, equity market investors have leaped at the opportunity to help build roads, if they are politically allowed to do so.

This rail plan, like many which are probably put forth in hopes of capturing federal grants, deals almost exclusively with what estimated starting capital costs are, along with annual operating and maintenance costs are estimated to be. Notably, the H-GAC plan dodges what future costs are to be with regard to having to handle substantial future capital expenses. This is not unusual, as Harris County Metro also did not address where future monies for capital repairs would come from for its light rail lines, having cut off its financial analysis at the year 2030, roughly a decade before major capital expenditures would have to be addressed.

The federal emphasis on diverting one in six gas tax dollars to capital expenditures on mass transit, but not on operations, has had some very perverted effects on transit utilization in the United States. To cite just two of many examples:

1) In Los Angeles, the LA-MTA has spent some \$11 billion in inflation adjusted dollars building rail lines since 1985, when LA-MTA carried some 500 million annual boardings. Despite this massive expenditure, transit boardings fell by over 25 percent by 1994 due to cutting bus service in order to help pay for rail. Transit boardings only returned to 500 million in 2008 after LA-MTA, under court pressure from the NAACP who sued LA-MTA for cutting bus service to minority neighborhoods, started restoring bus service. In fact, since the LA region has seen population increases of over 20 percent since that time period, the agency has seen a drop in per capita transit utilization since rail was introduced.

2) In San Jose, the local agency lost over 20 percent of its ridership after deciding to start concentrating on constructing rail lines.

The H-GAC study estimates that possible annual O&M costs are to be about \$90 million. The study does not specifically delegate who exactly is supposed to be operating these trains. However, if the task is handed over to Harris County Metro, it should be noted that the O&M costs of running these trains will be in rivalry with the agency's resources, and if so, may result in further cuts to bus service in the event that O&M costs are not recouped.

Barry Klein, President of the Houston Property Rights Association, a Houston area watchdog group, mentioned at the July 1, 2008 meeting that starting capital costs are likely to be understated. There is strong evidence that this statement is true, indeed there is a term called optimism bias, which is used in the learned scholarly literature to describe initial start up cost understatements. Danish scholar Bent Flyvbjerg in his book Megaprojects, notes that project promoters often underestimate costs and overestimate benefits in order to get their projects passed. Observers often note that once a project is started, then the entities are susceptible to moral hazards, knowing that taxpayers will cover any cost overruns because once the project is started, it must be completed. In the case of rail projects, cost overruns often run between 30 – 100 percent of initial estimates.

With regard to annual O&M costs and prices paid by passengers, I can impart this knowledge. Between December 2006 – April 2007, I went to the United Kingdom three times on behalf of my employer. While there, I traveled by train on a few occasions, and I queried many of my colleagues as to their commute patterns into work. One of my colleagues lives in Brighton, a seaside city, and commutes to London, a distance of 47 miles (94 miles round trip) everyday via commuter train. He purchases a monthly pass from Britain's National Rail which costs him 370 pounds per month, which at current exchange rates is about \$740 U.S. dollars.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Rail

The National Rail system was privatized during Conservative Party rule, ergo a reasonable assumption is that the cost of my colleague's transit trip is enough to cover at operating expenses, which amount to roughly 40 cents per passenger mile to travel. I do not know if those fares are enough to cover capital costs. I also traveled to Oxford from London twice, a distance of 66 miles (132 mile round trip) and my ticket costs were 19 and 22 pounds (\$38 and \$44), or roughly 30 cents per passenger mile.

Based on these real world observations from elsewhere, a would be train rider who makes a 25 mile one way commute (50 miles round trip) on a future commuter would incur an operating cost of some \$15 - \$20 for the round trip at todays costs and at minimum should be charged as such. Note that such costs do not include whether a would be commuter would have to pay for parking once they have reached a train station.

I have not had enough time to review the entire document, but at bottom there is little doubt that the H-GAC commuter rail scheme is a huge subsidy for a small number of Houston's 10 million (or more) daily trips, particularly as the projected 40,000 commuters would not be asked to pay for the annual O&M costs, much less the capital costs of this project. There is no particular reason why those commuters should be entitled to such, as they can easily change their jobs to move closer to them or employers can move closer to their employees in an era of high fossil fuel prices. At the very minimum, H-GAC should make a study of whether there are other transit solutions available, such as acquiring property for a bus rapid transit solution or simply improving on existing HOV infrastructure. Otherwise, this scheme is yet another burden on overburdened taxpayers.

Neal Meyer