

From: James DePitts

Comments are directed only at the 290 corridor plan.

In keeping with the METRO Solutions referendum plan, the 290 commuter rail should terminate at the 610 Loop, at or near the METRO NWTC. Passengers for downtown transfer to buses, initially, or to LRT.

We in Houston Heights are adamantly opposed to the extension of the 290 commuter rail on the old MKT right of way, especially if that includes operating through the eastern part of our neighborhood.

In fact, the plan showing the commuter rail on MKT to Yale to UPRR is unacceptable as well as it provides no neighborhood access to the transit system.

Having the yards and shops at Eureka is also suspect in that no exploration was done of sites in the more industrial areas along Hempstead Hwy. Eureka is a way for the camel to get his nose under the tent. In other words, if Eureka is used for vehicle storage and maintenance it encourages the future use of the remainder of the MKT alignment for commuter rail. Put the yards and shops outside the Loop, even on the far 290 end of things. Trains will deadhead in the morning or afternoon but the Eureka plan requires deadheading in both peak periods and increases deadhead miles.

I would propose that the better transit concept is an LRT alignment on Washington Ave. all the way to NWTC/Commuter Rail terminal. Commuter rail passengers would have one transfer, as opposed to having to transfer to the LRT Post Oak then to the LRT University. Inner Katy residents would then have system access along Washington Ave.

The original METRO Solutions Inner Katy LRT would have operated along the MKT to Yale, much as the commuter rail might. This plan may have been ok back in 2002, but much more residential development has occurred in the past 6 years on the west side of Heights Blvd. adjacent to the MKT. The opportunity to have an LRT station at Yale & 7th may now be lost.

Finally, it's my opinion that the Washington Ave. Yale MKT NWTC alignment is ideal for a stand-alone monorail line which could connect to the North Intermodal.

Jim DePitts

From: Dane McKittrick

With respect to the Gulf Freeway rail service (Actually it is along Highway 3), there is one very significant issue.

There are three main ingress/egress routes from the pretty heavily populated area once known as Clear Lake City. This is the area north of the lake, east of Highway 3, south of Ellington Field and west of Armand Bayou.

While there are other routes out of the area (Space Center Blvd to the Beltway and a couple of routes to Highway 146), the predominant traffic flow is toward the Gulf Freeway. The routes available are NASA Parkway, Bay Area Blvd. and Clear Lake City Blvd. There are a few lesser routes like Medical Center Blvd. and El Dorado but these both have their limitations.

The thing all these roads share is an at grade crossing of the railroad tracks. When a relatively short and quick freight train happens through this area at rush hour, it creates a traffic back up that extends as much as two miles in both directions and takes fifteen to twenty minutes to clear.

I am sure that a commuter train will not close an intersection for as long a period of time, but I am also sure it will upset the timing, such as it is, of the traffic signals. Running a commuter train through that area every thirty minutes or so will guarantee a constant traffic snarl that will make it nearly impossible to get into and out of Clear Lake

If there is any thought about using the rail as a means of evacuation, take of the foregoing situation and increase it by about an order of magnitude. Clear Lake would become un-evacuatable.

If this plan has any hope of actually improving conditions, there would have to be grade separation at the major ingress/egress points. I do not believe that has been taken into consideration in the cost of this plan. Currently NASA Parkway by-pass is under construction and that would become the only reliable way out of the area.

There are other areas that would suffer nearly as badly as Clear Lake. League City, for example, also has few egress routes and a population growing exponentially.

I am not as familiar with the 290 route, but assume that it uses the existing track along Hempstead Highway. This too has a large number of grade crossings that stay very busy throughout the rush hour. I am sure that regular gate closings along this route will wreak havoc on these already busy crossings.

Having said all of that, I agree in principal that this plan has significant merit. It simply requires more evaluation before receiving any endorsement.

To Whom It May Concern,

I have gone over the study, and I am happy that someone out there is listening to us, the commuters. Houston is too big with way too many people not to have something like this in place. While I do believe this is late in coming, it is at least being considered. Having the appropriate people backing this initiative to see it through to completion gives us a ray of hope that we'll at least have other alternatives to get to work. Some commuters are facing the prospect of leaving the Houston area just because of the fact that finding jobs with decent pay within somewhat normal commute times is almost impossible because the jobs are downtown and they can't afford to live where they work.

Thank you for doing this study and getting the ball rolling ~ I think using the existing lines is a great idea; I do appreciate it very much. Now, let's get to it.

Jennifer Garrison
Advisor, Instructor ESOL
Lone Star College - CyFair, Fairbanks Center

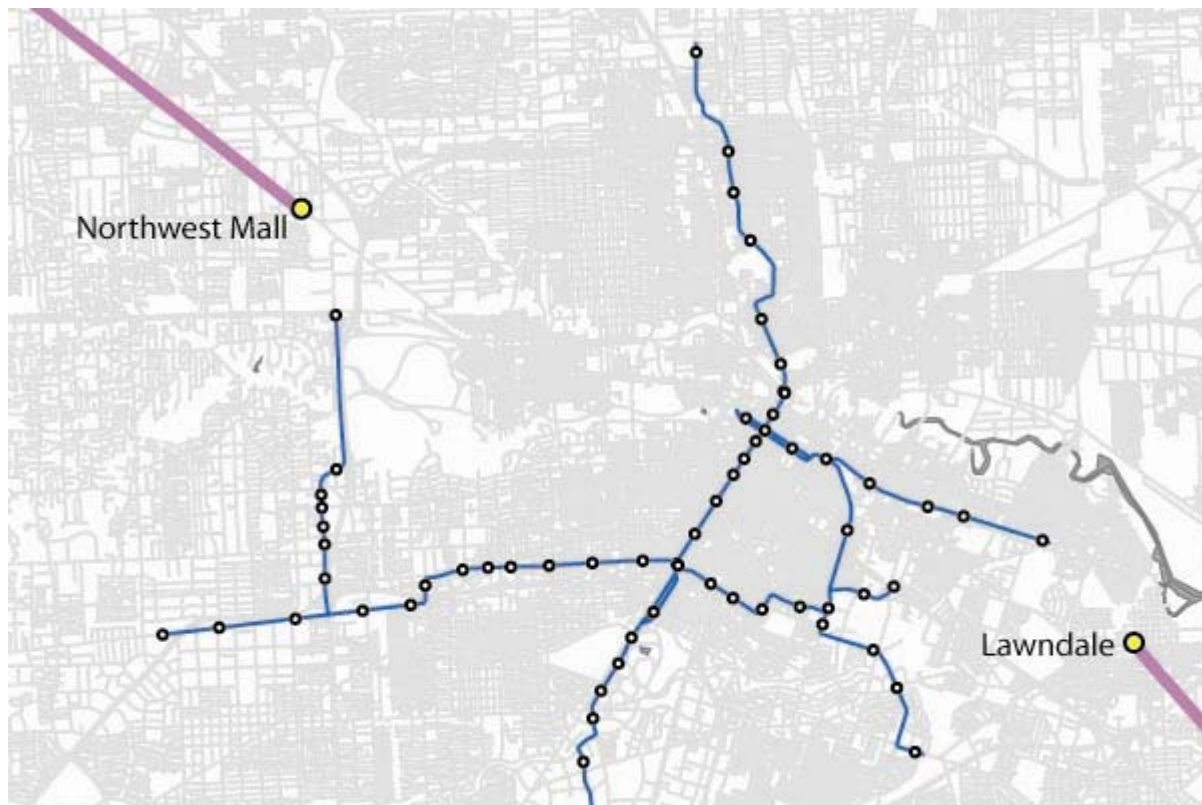
[Commuter rail: fast but right](#)

Tuesdays' public meeting on commuter rail showed two approaches to implementing commuter rail. The first is contained in the report itself, which lays out a five-line, \$3 billion system with totally new lines inside the 610 loop and terminal stations and maintenance facilities designed to support even more lines.

The second approach came from Harris County Judge Ed Emmett, who wants to get two lines – Galveston and Hempstead – up and running as soon as possible.

There's a definite appeal to Emmet's vision. The sooner trains are running, the sooner we begin to see benefits. But there are pitfalls as well. The most dangerous of these is political. If a quick commuter rail implementation is ineffective — if it results in long, inconvenient trips, if it carries low ridership — it might cause riders and voters to give up on commuter rail altogether. So while it's nice to be quick, it's equally important to be good. Whatever the first line is, it must be effective.

The easiest way to implement the Galveston and Hempstead lines would be to extend them no further inside 610 than their first intersection with any other freight rail lines. This would create two temporary commuter rail terminals: one somewhere near Northwest Mall, and one around Broadway and Lawndale in the outer East End, near Pasadena. Here, commuter rail riders would need to transfer to continue their trips to Downtown, the Medical Center, or Uptown. Unfortunately, neither of these places will have light rail by 2012. That would leave riders transferring to buses. Even if those buses use HOV lanes, that would not be an improvement on current service. It might be cheap, but it's not useful.

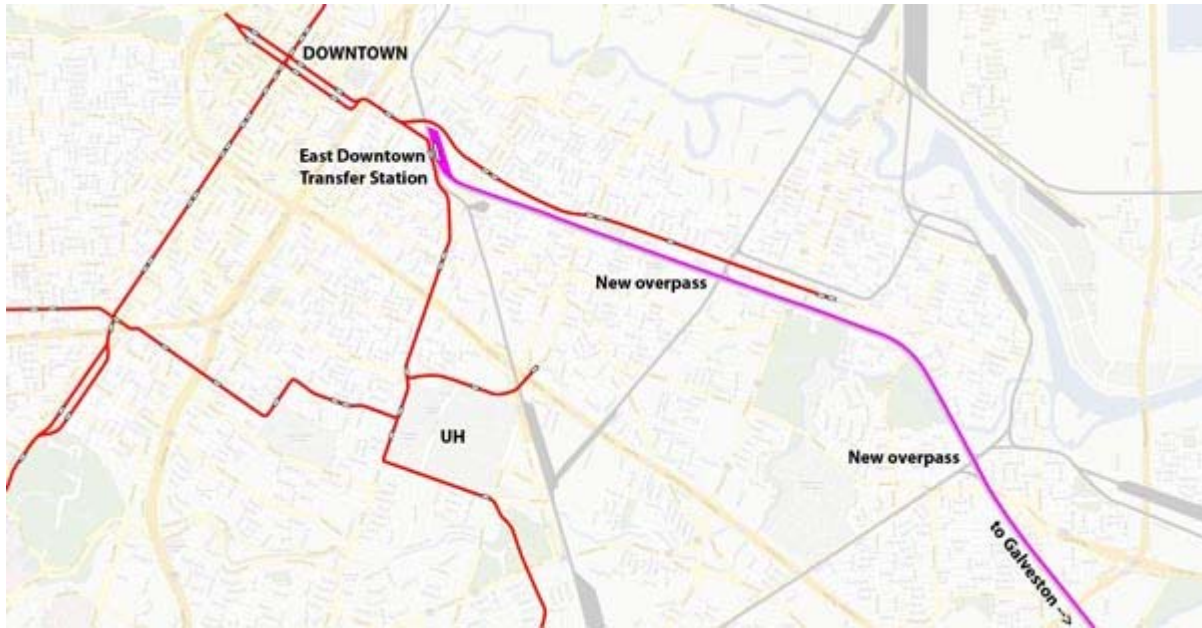


So here's the [question](#): is there a way to get commuter rail to light rail – and closer to the major activity centers – without massive new infrastructure? For the Galveston line, I think there is.



The railroad line that runs to Galveston – the UPRR Galveston Subdivision – is suitable for a quick implementation of commuter rail because it’s not very busy. Outside 610, it carries fewer than 10 trains a day, while Houston’s busiest lines carry 40 or 50. This line actually extends inside the loop to within a mile of Downtown, and even there it carries fewer than 15 trains a day. The problem is that it intersects at grade with two much busier lines. The other problem is that it does not extend to the planned downtown commuter rail terminal at the Intermodal Center; in between the two is a mile and a half of extremely congested track called the West Belt. Those three bottlenecks – the two crossings and the West Belt – are keeping Galveston trains away from Downtown.

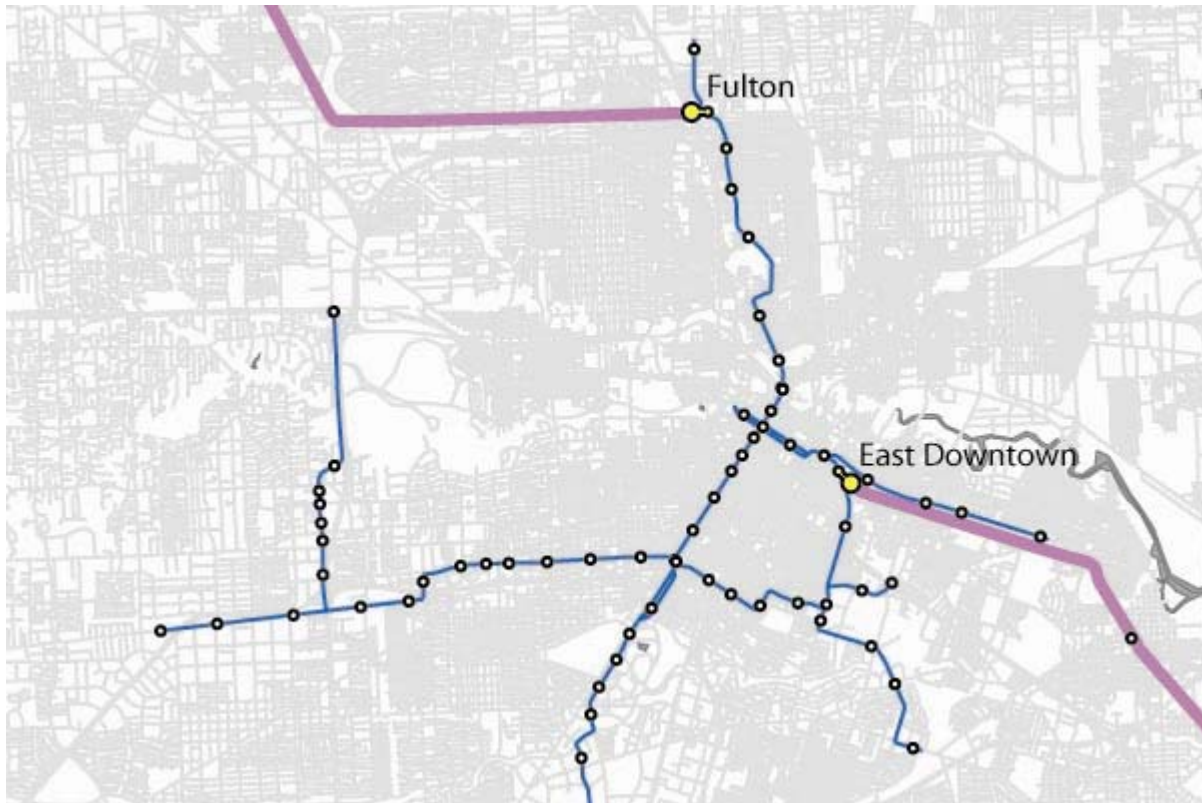
How do we fix those bottlenecks? The crossings are straight-forward: build new commuter rail overpasses. Commuter rail trains, unlike freight trains, can climb fairly steep grades, so this isn’t much different than a road overpass, and it could be built within the existing rail line right-of-way.



Solving the Downtown terminal problem requires rethinking an assumption that came from previous planning efforts. The Intermodal Terminal is not the only potential site for a Downtown station; in fact, there could be more than one Downtown station. Right at the end of the Galveston Subdivision is a fairly lightly used freight rail yard – Congress Yard – that happens to be alongside the Southeast Line light rail alignment. There’s room here to store and maintain the handful of trains that would be required to operate this one line, and there’s room for a passenger platform that could be linked with an overhead walkway to a new station on the Southeast Line, only two stops away from the Downtown office core.



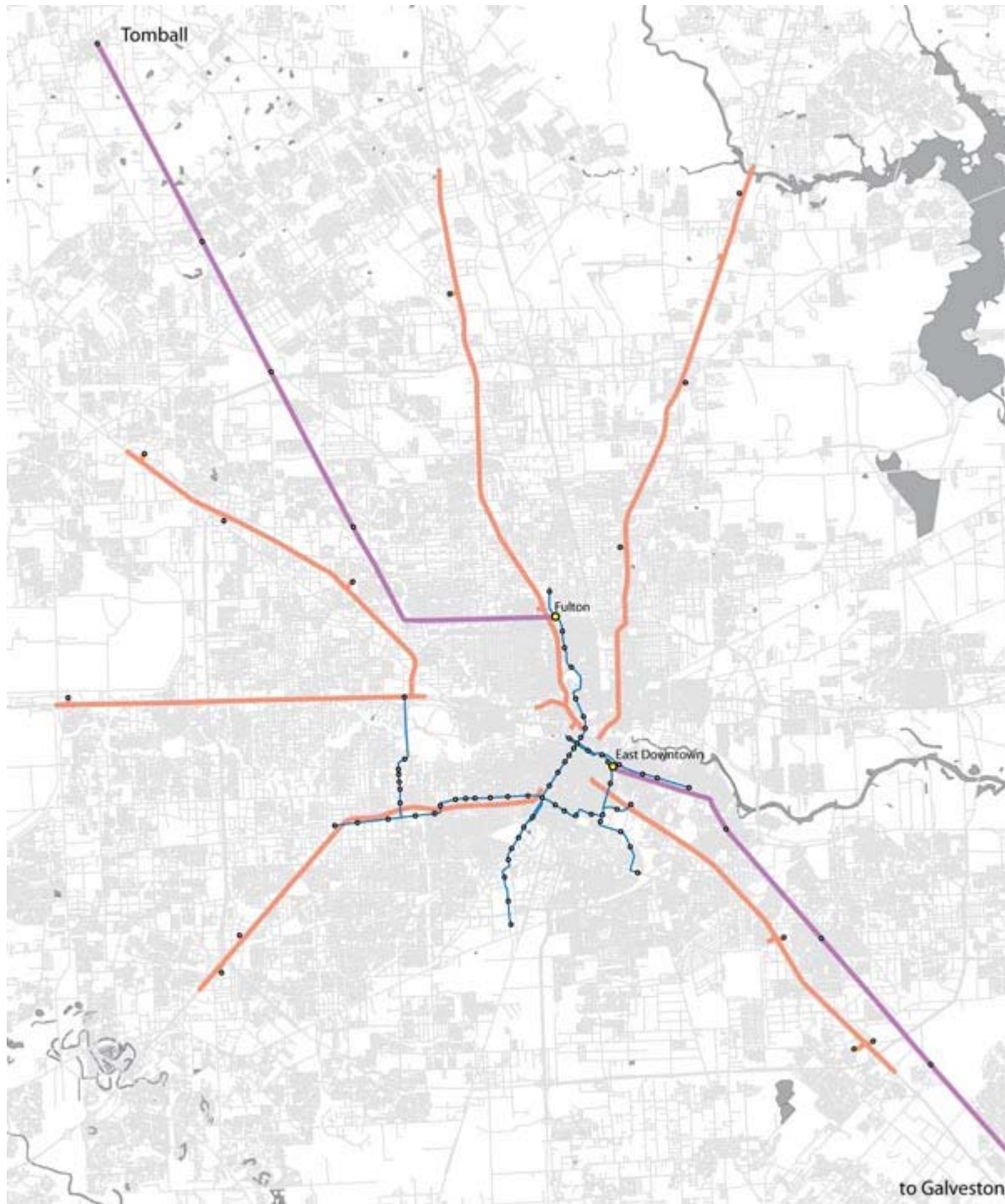
From here, it would be a 15-minute ride to Downtown; that could actually be cut to 10 minutes by running express service that would skip stops between here and UH Downtown, then run local along the rest of the Main Street Line. New Jersey's Hudson-Bergen Light rail does this successfully. That same service could also benefit local riders coming from the transit center at Northline Mall. Once again, this line would improve on current transit service from day one.



Both of these solutions suit themselves to an incremental approach. They could be implemented relatively quickly, relatively affordably, but they would provide useful, convenient service. But they also do not preclude the larger terminal facilities or the additional lines contemplated in the HGAC plan. The places on the other lines in the HGAC plan — and places not included in that plan — want service, too. And a bigger system would require more infrastructure. Perhaps the most important part of the HGAC study is its recommendations to safeguard right of way now to build stations, tracks, and maintenance facilities later. Building commuter rail won't get easier as the city gets denser — it will only get harder. And it's not easy even now.

Where do you want to go in 2012? Tell us in the [forums](#).

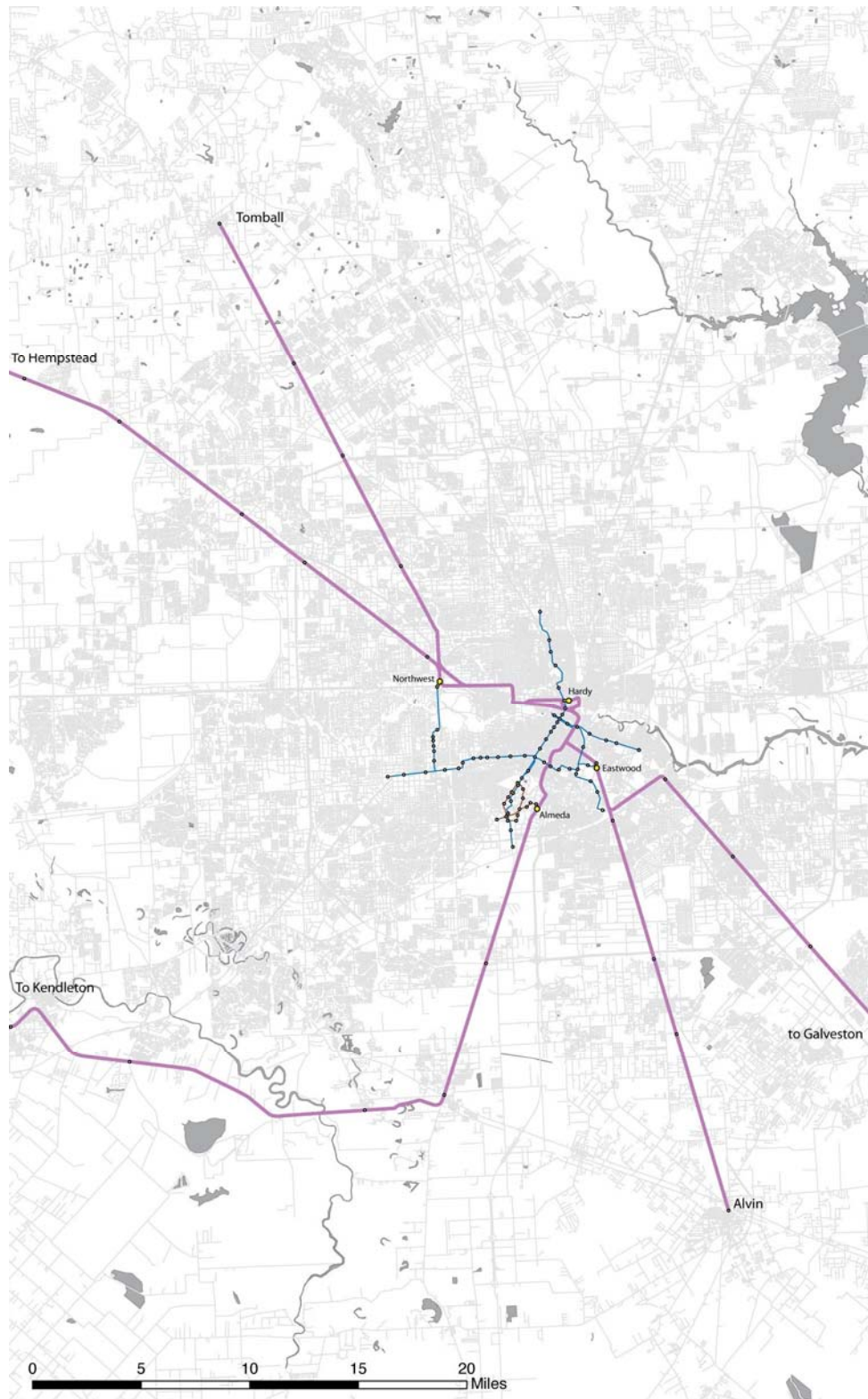
[map below: these two commuter rail lines is purple, HOV lanes in orange, 2012 light rail in blue]



This entry was posted on Saturday, July 5th, 2008 at 8:56 pm and is filed under [Uncategorized](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. Both comments and pings are currently closed.

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From: Tory Gattis



OK, after attending a couple of public meetings, reading the [H-GAC report summary](#), and having an in-depth meeting with Christof (and thinking about his [five questions](#)), I think we've come to a consensus on what the right answer is for a "phase 1" commuter rail program ([here's my first post on the topic](#)). Those who remember my "[Commuter rail is the wrong ride](#)" op-ed from a few years ago - which Barry handed out at the H-GAC public meeting - might wonder why I've changed my mind. I will lay out the reasoning, as well as the narrow set of circumstances where I think it makes sense. I'm *not* now a blanket supporter of commuter rail. **HOV/HOT express buses that travel nonstop at high speed and circulate at their destinations are still the best overall commuter transit solution for the many decentralized job centers of Houston.**

The reasons commuter rail can make some sense now for Houston:

1. I agree with County Judge Ed Emmett that our metro growth is so fast now, and projected to be so large over the next few decades, that we will really need to tap all sources of mobility capacity that we can.
2. Freight track corridors have been identified that are underutilized, and can support scheduled commuter services. The capacity is there, and we can tap it at marginal cost.
3. For the most part, the new services will not overlap or eliminate Metro express HOV commuter buses. The goal is to add all-new service and capacity, not replace what we already have.
4. Commuter rail is more comfortable for very long haul, connecting to places well outside the Beltway. **In particular, passenger service stretching from TAMU College Station to Prairie View A&M to NASA JSC Clear Lake to UTMB Galveston is attractive for economic development purposes by tying more academic and technological brainpower to our city.** (similar to how Yale and Princeton are tied into NYC)
5. \$4 gas (and increasing) is driving up demand for commuter transit, and Metro cannot buy buses or expand P&Rs fast enough. In fact, some of these rail services may free up more express buses for other in-demand routes.

The trick is doing something helpful, quickly and affordably. The hardest, most expensive, and most controversial part is inside the 610 loop. There are calls for expensive elevated structures and new routes through neighborhoods that will trigger a firestorm of protest. If I heard Judge Emmett right, he wants to do a "quick and dirty" implementation that stops at the loop and transfers to buses. That could be a mess. Cheap, yes, but offering bad service that attracts few riders and undermines public support. We believe he is partially right focusing on Galveston and 290 lines, but there are tweaks that can make for a much better start.

Here are the elements of our proposal:

- **Galveston line** that comes all the way in to just east of downtown, with transfers to the new East/SE LRT lines to get into downtown. Christof has worked out how this is possible without using busy freight lines or building elevated structures (which he will detail in his own post soon). The line will have few if any stops inside the Beltway and will not replace Metro HOV services inside the Beltway.
- Since a 290 line cannot (currently) make it to downtown, would not actually reach the Uptown LRT (it stops at the NW transit center), and is already well served with HOV bus service, it should *not* be part of a phase 1. Instead, some freight track improvements need to be made first inside the loop (along the Terminal subdivision - and they're needed regardless of commuter rail), which Christof will articulate in detail. Those will pave the way for a future 290 service that does *not* use the empty RoW through the residential Heights.

- Instead, the real short-term opportunity is a **249 line to Tomball through the vast 1960-area suburbs, as well as picking up the back side of The Woodlands**. This would attract many riders who do not currently have good access to HOV express bus service, and it would take traffic pressure off of both 290 and 45N. In fact, **249 ranked higher than 290 in H-GAC's study** ([see figure ES-7](#)) This starter line would be used as is, and new track would *not* be rammed through the neighborhood north of the 290-610 interchange (as shown in the [H-GAC plan](#)). Instead riders would ride it all the way in to the North Metro LRT and transfer near Northline mall. A bus transfer stop would be an option down Mangum for those going to Uptown.
- As part of this phase 1, Metro would experiment with running **express LRT trains** from the Northline transfer into downtown. The idea is that, after transferring off the 249 commuter train, most of those riders would want an express direct to downtown, with no slowing stops along the way. There are different ways these express cars could be run, even without a third track, via simple timing or using crossover tracks for passing (or maybe even via third tracks at selected stations). The expresses might be slightly disruptive to the local trains (making them crossover and/or freeze at certain points for a couple minutes), but it would be worth it for the enhanced commuter service, and would only be used for a handful of inbound trains in the morning and outbound trains in the afternoon rush hours that connect specifically with the infrequent commuter trains. If the expresses can be made to work well on the North line, they could be considered for other LRT lines in the future as needed for other new commuter rail connections.
- For phase 1, no expensive hub, and only minimal maintenance facilities. Each of the two lines might have separate small maint facilities, or they could be routed at off-hours along the freight tracks to a central facility inside the loop (like Eureka yards). The freight tracks inside the loop are too congested to support scheduled commuter rail, but they still have enough capacity to shuffle around out-of-service commuter trains when needed (as long as they are not in any hurry).
- **The phase 1 target is 2012**, to coincide with Metro's LRT plan, since it obviously relies on those connections.

Bottom line: we think both lines might be doable for a **total capital cost less than \$1 billion**, vs. the \$3 billion in the full H-GAC starter plan. That might sound like a lot, but it's only about twice what the Main St. LRT cost, and it's about 80 miles of track vs. 7.5 for Main St. It's also way cheaper than any new freeway capacity serving the same places.

Long-term potentials include a 290 line that connects on to Prairie View and College Station while continuing through the core on to Galveston (parents: easy-ship your teens to the beach and theme parks during the summer!), a downtown connection at Amtrak/UHD that would be more effective than Metro's northern intermodal terminal, and maybe lines to Alvin/Pearland and Ft. Bend. That's all speculative at this point, and I'm not prepared to pass judgment on their cost effectiveness. But this 2-line, "lite phase 1" proposal seems like it could be a cost effective way to "test the waters" by going after the low-hanging-fruit commuter rail opportunities while taking advantage of the Metro Solutions core rail network to save money and neighborhood disruption.

I will update this post with a link to Christof's excellent new maps when they become available. If you know anyone attending Judge Emmett's commuter rail summit this coming week, please pass this along for their consideration. Much appreciated.