

New light-rail plan rolls into Austin

Among many obstacles: What's the cost, and who pays?

By [Ben Wear](#)

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A consultant hired by the city is recommending a 14-mile light-rail system for Central Austin, not streetcars as proposed by Capital Metro. The system would run from the airport to downtown, through the University of Texas and east to the emerging Mueller development.

The route is essentially the same one City Council Member Brewster McCracken and Austin Mayor Will Wynn have been talking about for the past six months or so. The proposal, finished just seven weeks after the council voted to pay ROMA Design Group up to \$250,000 to produce it, comes as a "transit task force" formed by Wynn and state Sen. Kirk Watson moves into the final stages of creating a process to analyze rail proposals.

No one yet knows how the proposal, which likely will cost hundreds of millions of dollars, would be paid for.

That task force would almost surely analyze this proposal, and the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization board (chaired by Watson) would have the final say. But it is not clear whether such an examination could occur quickly enough for the light-rail proposal to be put before voters in November. **Wynn has said he would like to have a rail vote this year, but there will be a number of complicated questions about costs and benefits.**

Watson, who was in South Texas on Tuesday, had not seen the proposal and had no comment. But Watson said that the process created by the task force "will allow any project to be fully vetted in a transparent, open, complete way."

McCracken, at least, said he thinks that the proposal can make it through that gantlet to a public vote in November, which he said would probably involve voters being asked to approve some sort of long-term debt.

"Yes, I think that's likely," McCracken said of getting the proposal onto the ballot in time.

Council Member Lee Leffingwell has his doubts. He said that only Wynn and McCracken, to his knowledge, had been briefed on the rail proposal.

"The key to this whole thing has been, how's this going to be paid for?" Leffingwell said. "If you just want to put the concept on the ballot in November, that would be one thing. But if you're talking about some sort of financial commitment by the city, I think it would be very hard to get there by that time."

Leffingwell and McCracken are often mentioned as likely candidates for mayor next year.

McCracken says he envisions the city taking the lead in building the line but that Capital Metro probably would run it.

"I don't see that anyone else knows how to do that," McCracken said.

But that would presumably mean that Capital Metro, which has said that running its current operations will require all of its revenue the next few years, would have to absorb what are likely to be substantial operating losses.

"How does that affect bus service now and in the future, which is the only means of transportation for many people in Austin?" Leffingwell asked.

The recommendation from ROMA did not include a specific cost estimate.

McCracken said the cost would be somewhere between \$5 million a mile and \$30 million a mile, depending mostly on how many underground utility lines would have to be relocated. That would put the total cost at between \$70 million and \$420 million.

Those figures, he said, would probably not include the cost of the cars.

The diesel-powered cars Capital Metro has purchased for its "red line" commuter service from Leander to downtown, set to open in a few months, cost about \$6 million apiece, and the agency bought six of them to start with. Light-rail cars typically cost less than that.

John Lewis, a real estate developer who supported Capital Metro's commuter rail project after vigorously opposing a light-rail referendum in 2000 that failed, scoffed at McCracken's cost figures.

"We all know that there will be serious under-estimating of what this silly thing is going to cost," Lewis said in an e-mail. "What is guessed to be \$400 million today will be \$800 million when it nears completion. ... These routes being proposed have no user demand and will do virtually nothing to give taxpayers an alternative to their car."

Capital Metro officials have said they have no money left in the kitty to pay for more rail, so where would the money come from to build this?

McCracken envisions a funding scenario that includes using perhaps 15 percent to 20 percent of revenue from Capital Metro's 1 percent sales tax (although the agency has indicated it needs it all for current bus and rail expenses), contributions from the city and other local governments, from property taxes likely to be generated by new development along the line and, potentially, from airport bonds.

"We think it is possible to build this with no new taxes," McCracken said.

According to McCracken, the recommendation from ROMA will propose putting double tracks (allowing travel in both directions simultaneously) from Austin-Bergstrom International Airport and west on Riverside Drive. The route would turn north at South Congress Avenue (although there could be a spur to the parking-poor Long Center, McCracken said, or even to Zilker Park), cross the Ann Richards Congress Avenue Bridge and then go through downtown either on Congress or San Jacinto Boulevard.

Then it would pass through UT, turning east at Dean Keeton Street and going along Manor Road to Mueller.

A major criticism of the light rail that voters rejected in 2000 was that it would take street lanes away from car traffic. Not so, in this case, McCracken said, although the tracks would be in "dedicated lanes" segregated from cars. The space for the tracks, McCracken said, would come from available right of way on Riverside east of Interstate 35. Downtown, the tracks would run on pavement currently occupied by parked cars, he said.

The tracks, McCracken said, might take two lanes from the bridge over Lady Bird Lake, he said, although alternatively it could use the space now taken up by sidewalks. In that case, a sidewalk alternative bridge, such as the one on the South First Street bridge, would continue pedestrian and bicycle access across the lake on Congress.

The dedicated-lane concept was news even to Charlie Betts, executive director of the Downtown Austin Alliance. The alliance has been firmly behind the streetcar plan, in which the trolleys would share lanes with cars. To avoid reducing lanes on Congress would require tearing up the curb and sidewalk extensions that currently delineate the parking spaces.

"That's a new wrinkle, and we haven't had time to think about it," Betts said.

Pat Clubb, vice president for employee and campus services at UT, likes the Mueller connection. The university has a new research building there, and she anticipates that some faculty and staff will live in the residential community swiftly rising at Mueller. And she said having a rail line on San Jacinto, in the shadow of Royal-Memorial Stadium and near the LBJ Library and Bass

Concert Hall, will help.

As for losing parking spots along San Jacinto, Clubb said that "losing any parking on campus is an issue" but that the university generally has been looking to move most of that to garages anyway.

bwear@statesman.com; 445-3698

More on the proposed light-rail line

Would we lose car lanes on some major streets?

Not necessarily, Austin City Council Member Brewster McCracken says. On Riverside Drive, there is ample city right of way to put in the tracks outside of the existing street. On the Ann Richards Congress Avenue Bridge, existing lanes would be needed unless the sidewalk space were used and a new pedestrian bridge were built.

Who would run this railroad?

Capital Metro, McCracken says, although he says the city would take the lead in financing and building it.

Are there other possible extensions?

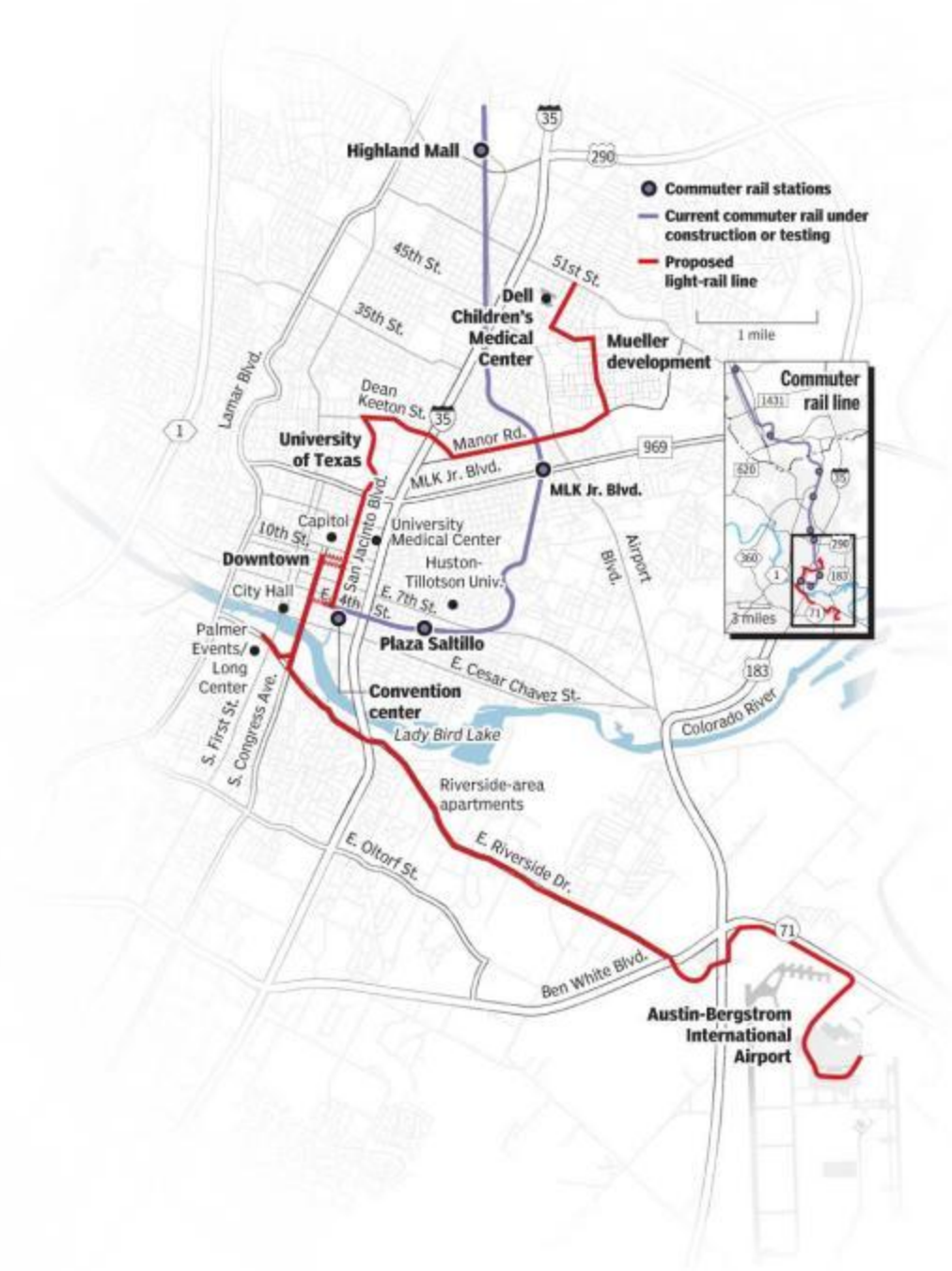
Yes. McCracken says a spur could extend west from Congress to the Long Center for the Performing Arts or even to Zilker Park. And a crosstown line from the Seaholm Power Plant development area west of City Hall to the end of the commuter line at Fourth and Trinity streets is a possibility, as is building commuter rail from a railroad junction in East Austin out to Manor and Elgin.

What's next?

The creator of the light-rail plan, ROMA Design Group, will take public comment and perhaps tweak the plan before taking it to the City Council on May 8. The plan is likely to go before Mayor Will Wynn's transit working group. The final decision would be made by the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization board, which includes Wynn and McCracken.

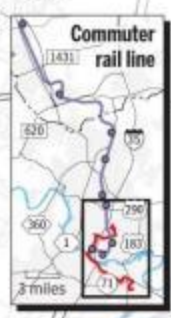
— Ben Wear

Courtesy of JB Goodwin



- Commuter rail stations
- Current commuter rail under construction or testing
- Proposed light-rail line

1 mile



Highland Mall

45th St.

35th St.

Dean Keeton St.

Manor Rd.

MLK Jr. Blvd.

University of Texas

University Medical Center

Huston-Tillotson Univ.

E. 7th St.

Plaza Saltillo

Convention center

E. Cesar Chavez St.

Riverside-area apartments

E. Oltorf St.

E. Riverside Dr.

Ben White Blvd.

Austin-Bergstrom International Airport

1

Lamar Blvd.

10th St.

City Hall

Palmer Events/Long Center

S. First St.

S. Congress Ave.

San Jacinto Blvd.

E. 4th St.

35

51st St.

290

Mueller development

969

MLK Jr. Blvd.

Airport Blvd.

183

Colorado River

Lady Bird Lake

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2 miles

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