

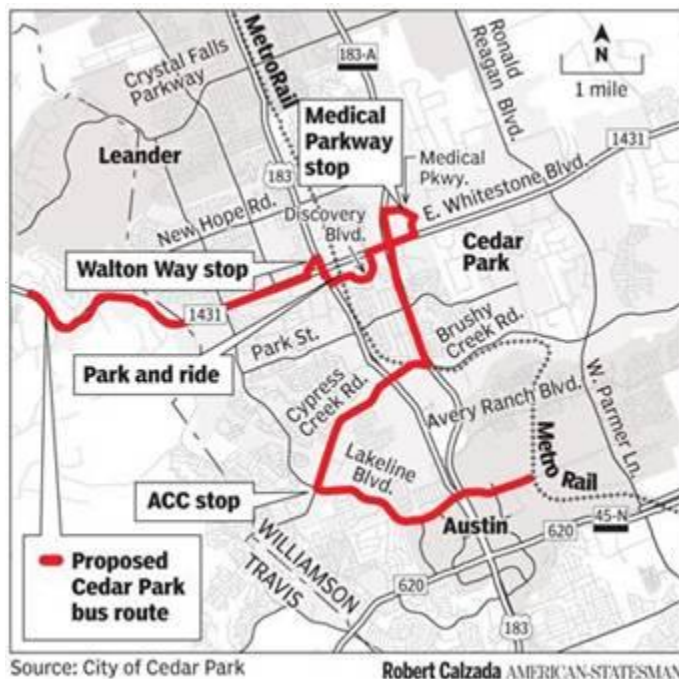
## Public buses in Cedar Park? Maybe next year

*Pilot program would bring public transportation back to the city.*

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Public buses may return in January to this northwest suburb for the first time in more than a decade.

If the City Council approves a yearlong pilot program next month, a Capital Metro bus route would begin making stops near retail stores, the city library, medical facilities and Austin Community College's Cypress Creek campus. Cedar Park would contribute \$80,400, most of the operating expenses.

"We're willing to do a pilot program here and see how it works out for a year," Mayor Bob Lemon said. "We'll get a feel for who's riding it and whether there's value in that."

The program would be a partnership among Cedar Park, ACC and Capital Metro.

In 1998, Cedar Park residents decided to sever ties with Capital Metro and redirected a portion of the city's sales tax that was going to the transit agency to economic development, Assistant City Manager Jose Madrigal said. Officials credit the move with helping attract new business to the city, leading to a population boom that has doubled the city's size to roughly 54,000.

The city's efforts to bring back public transportation in the past stalled because Capital Metro wouldn't provide services without the city sharing a portion of its sales tax revenue, Lemon said.

But in 2008, Cap Metro decided to offer bus service to cities outside the service area that were willing to pay for it.

Cedar Park will be the first city to take part, said Meredith Highsmith, a senior planner with Capital Metro.

As part of the deal, Capital Metro would alter Route 214, which currently runs from the Lakeline Station Park and Ride in Northwest Austin to Lago Vista. The route runs through Cedar Park but currently makes no stops.

The altered route would include four stops in Cedar Park. Several 20- to 25-passenger buses would run from 5 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday through Friday.

Stops would be at the ACC campus; an unused Cap Metro park-and-ride location on Discovery Boulevard, which is near the police station and city library; and spots on Walton Way, off RM 1431, and Medical Parkway, near Cedar Park Regional Medical Center.

The flex route, meaning it could deviate based on need, is expected to add up to 80 passengers a day from Cedar Park, Madrigal said.

If the program is successful, the city would consider continuing the route.

The city's economic development board earlier this month authorized about \$51,000 to pay for the program. The council must approve the board's decision for the plan to move forward.

The rest of the city's portion of the bill would come from \$30,000 that Cedar Park already budgets annually for federally mandated transportation services for people with disabilities.

ACC would pitch in roughly \$25,000, Madrigal said.

Fare revenue would go to Capital Metro.

If the city decides to continue the program beyond a year, the council would have to find a different funding source, because under state law an economic development board cannot fund ongoing transportation projects.

Madrigal said the money would probably come out of the city's general fund. He said its cost after the first year would depend partly on fuel prices and Capital Metro staffing needs.

The Austin Community College Board of Trustees and the Capital Metro board would also need to approve the plan.

Several council members questioned how the program's success would be measured, how many residents would benefit from it and whether spending the money for the pilot program is the right thing to do during a budget crunch.

"I'm not of the mind that says we should spend a substantial amount of money to see if this works or not," Council Member Tony Dale said. "I need to know the endgame that says, 'If it does work, what's the plan next year to fund this thing?'"

Capital Metro would compile ridership statistics, and the city would examine the data starting roughly six months from the beginning of the program, Madrigal said.

Lemon said the council has yet to reach a consensus on criteria for a successful program, such as use by Cedar Park residents or the number of out-of-towners using the route to come to the city.

City Council Member Matt Powell said that before he would support the plan, he would like to be assured that the city would interview riders to get their take on the quality of the program, as well as collect ridership figures.

"I think the concept is intriguing, and if nothing else, I'm really glad to see real discussion between Cedar Park and Capital Metro," Powell said.

**Courtesy of JB Goodwin**