

Suburbs focus on bus, rail options

Local leaders say population growth and commuter frustration has fueled demand for alternate travel

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Smaller cities around Austin are starting to take a harder look at bringing intracity busing systems, connections to Capital Metro bus lines or even rail to their residents.

Longer commutes, tight budgets and oil price worries mean more people say they'd rather hop on a bus or train than fire up their pickup, local leaders say. So officials in some area cities are working on plans that would allow their residents a chance to do just that.

That's a big switch from a Central Texas culture where cars are king.

"Cars have worked really cool for a really long time, but the next step is some sort of mass transit," Round Rock City Manager Jim Nuse said. "And I think everybody is recognizing that's happening."

Austin has had a public busing system for decades, and nearby cities have discussed the idea of adding public transportation for years. But recent population growth, new highways to run rail along and gas prices that crept toward \$4 a gallon last year have pushed the issue to the forefront.

Cities in metropolitan areas typically turn to public transportation as populations pass 1.5 million, said Fritz Steiner, dean of the University of Texas School of Architecture. The Austin metropolitan population is estimated at about 1.7 million.

Steiner, who serves on the Transit Working Group, said the Austin area is unusual in that "the conventional expressways and roadways are not as well developed as other parts of the country. You've got a lot of traffic going on relatively few routes."

Capital Metro's new commuter rail also pushed city leaders a little further. That system has faced recent delays, but officials hope commuter rail will pull into a train station in Leander this year.

"It showed that it can actually be done," Tom Word, Round Rock's chief of public works operations, said of CapMetro's Red Line. "It is capturing a lot of people's interest."

Signs of movement in public transportation plans can be seen around Central Texas.

Kyle officials have started discussions with Capital Metro about a park-and-ride express station within their city. Last month, Round Rock officials asked the federal government for \$2 million for a downtown bus station with buses that would link to the Tech Ridge park-and-ride in North Austin.

Cities like Kyle, Round Rock and Cedar Park can't join Capital Metro's service area because the portion of their sales tax that would go to the transit authority has already been dedicated by a public vote to economic development.

Round Rock officials are also considering building a rail line that would link to Capital Metro's pending commuter rail and would cost at least \$50 million for the first phase.

And the Austin-San Antonio Intermunicipal Commuter Rail District is pitching a plan for a 112-mile rail line from San Antonio to Georgetown, on existing Union Pacific rail that is mainly used by freight trains.

City leaders in municipalities the train would run through, such as San Marcos and Kyle, have lobbied state lawmakers for money to relocate the freight, which would cost about \$1.7 billion. In 2005, lawmakers created a fund for the project and several bills moving through the Legislature would put money into the fund, rail district interim executive director Ross Milloy said.

In Cedar Park, officials have expressed interest in paying for a rail station for Capital Metro's commuter train that passes through town.

Meanwhile, San Marcos, Georgetown and Cedar Park are all looking at ways to fund intracity bus systems.

In fact, Georgetown finished a \$30,000 test run, that went from downtown to Sun City, in February. After the run was over, City Council members decided the route was too limited to accurately measure ridership and asked city staff to further study how to best bring a bus system into the city, Georgetown spokesman Keith Hutchinson said.

A number of city leaders around Austin mention rail as an ultimate goal for transporting residents. But they say that even if they started building now, actually seeing a new train would be years away.

Still, they say views about transportation have shifted, and cities will try to accommodate.

"Anybody who lives in this area knows that options other than driving on I-35 every morning are things that people want to see happen," Kyle City Manager Tom Mattis said. "Any opportunity that would reduce that daily trip frustration for them, I think, is going to be a welcome thing."

Courtesy of JB Goodwin