

SUNDAY, JULY 23, 2006

Making tracks

Running the proposed University light rail line on Richmond makes the most sense, but Metro is offering reasonable alternatives.

On Aug. 8, the board of the Metropolitan Transit Authority will decide the course of its University light rail line. It's time to replace heated rhetoric and scare tactics with a review of the facts regarding how best to secure the greatest good for the greatest number of Houston residents. The detailed plans and options unveiled last week Metro Chairman David Wolff and President Frank Wilson do just that.

Of the five proposed new Metro transit lines, only the route linking the University of Houston and Texas Southern University on the east to the Galleria area and beyond has generated significant controversy. Metro's preferred route would run along Richmond from Main Street to South Rice near the Galleria. Some trains would continue north on Post Oak, while others would go west on Westpark to the Hillcroft Transit Center, giving Park 'n Ride patrons access to the expanding rail system.

That is the most direct route and the one surveys reveal would attract the most ridership. Without sufficient ridership, the line

will not qualify for federal financing. Without federal financing, the line needed to connect all the other transit corridors cannot be built.

Metro's president states that no matter what route the University line takes, it will form the key link in a citywide system that eventually will carry 140,000 passengers every work day, removing 35,000 cars from the city's streets. Against the opposition of some residents who don't want to endure the construction, the new line offers a \$1.2 billion economic boom that directly and indirectly will generate 60,000 jobs over six years - fully 10 percent of the Greater Houston Partnership's target of boosting employment by 600,000 in the same time period.

In building the University line, Metro officials promise to minimize the taking of private land along the route. Fearing costly and project-killing litigation, Metro contractors simultaneously tore up most of the Main Street corridor, disrupting commerce and traffic for more than a year. Having learned their lesson, Metro officials say,

the new lines will be done in smaller segments each taking only 180 days.

The agency will also help businesses that can document revenue losses caused by rail construction.

Wolff, a successful real estate developer, believes opponents who reside in Afton Oaks have failed to give residents there an accurate picture of the benefits that rail on Richmond would provide. He promises that not a single tree would be cut from the neighborhood's Richmond median, traffic lanes would be narrowed but none eliminated, no land would be taken from property owners and no house would be affected by the construction.

On the plus side, Metro would build an overpass on Richmond for both rail and street traffic over a freight train track just outside the neighborhood. The overpass would eliminate frequent and long waits for motorists. If residents successfully block rail through their area, they will deny themselves not only that improvement but also easy access to future citywide transit.

"Someday," Chairman

Wolff said, when gas could be costing \$5 per gallon, "if they don't have it they'll wonder why they can't get to their doctor and medical district easily, why they can't get downtown to work, why they can't get to the Museum District. The reality is we want to get this built, and if they continue to be fervently opposed, we probably will not take that route."

It would be unfortunate if opponents in Afton Oaks deprived their community of an asset that many other neighborhoods in Houston would pay to possess. If their opposition is successful, one of the winners will be Greenway Plaza, which would receive a coveted light rail station and enhanced access for its 55,000 workers. In exchange for that commercial boost, Greenway Plaza should at minimum donate to Metro easements on the land required for the station and rail right of way.

At Greenway Plaza or some other point prior to Afton Oaks, the alternative route would swing south to the Westpark corridor. That route would attract fewer riders, but would be carry passengers a higher speeds

and be cheaper to build.

U.S. Rep. John Culberson, a key player in securing federal transportation dollars for Metro's mobility plan, has not yet decided whether he will support the University route. In an e-mail issued last week after he met with Wolff and Wilson, he credited Metro with listening to the public and doing its best to incorporate ideas and suggestions into its plans.

"It is not my job to tell Metro where to build rail or

to help them sell it," wrote Culberson, "but it is my job to protect my constituents where they do not want Metro to build it."

This is an opportunity for Culberson to exhibit the civic-minded leadership and useful influence that this region lost with Tom DeLay's resignation from Congress. Given the demonstrated mobility benefits that the University line will provide Culberson's west side constituents and the prodigious efforts Metro made to

address citizen concerns, Culberson should weigh carefully the opposition of a few constituents versus the transit needs of the entire city and region.

No infrastructure project will please everyone, but the University line is essential to reduce congestion and pollution in Houston. It must not be ensnared in petty politics that ignore Houston's pressing mobility needs.