

Metro Rail on time for 2008

Contributed by Heidi Schoonover

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Rail on track for 2008 arrival MetroRail connects Northwest Austin to Downtown

By Rachel Youens

Only about 2,000 votes kept a 52-mile light rail track out of Austin back in 2000. With half of voters feeling underserved by the project, Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority went back to the drawing board.

They started by listening, and in the end heard input from nearly 8,000 citizens.

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For the amount of money we could put down, this route made the most sense. It was economical since the line was there, and it also passed through some of the fastest growing areas, said Julie Martin, Capital Metro's Community Involvement Coordinator who was there in 2004 taking feedback from the public. She points out that while moving from light rail to commuter rail meant cutting out other areas of Austin, these areas are better served with other parts of the All Systems Go plan, such as street cars.

Today, Capital Metro has branded this commuter line the MetroRail, and beginning in 2008 it will be running Austinites from the downtown Convention Center to Leander in around 55 minutes.

Making the MetroRail

MetroRail and the All Systems Go plan do not employ any bonds, raise taxes or incur debt. The \$90 million MetroRail is funded from the existing one cent sales tax Capital Metro reaps from Austin and other areas that

Capital Metro services, government grants and rider fares. Last year Capital Metro received more than \$135 million in tax revenue.

MetroRail is one of the most [financially] efficient systems in the country because its already paid and it runs on existing track, said Capital Metro spokesman Misty Whited. Other cities that build from scratch pay much more, which is generally done with bonds or taxes.

The MetroRail does not have the visual impact of other transportation projects, such as the toll roads, because the construction is minimal and spread out over a large area.

One of the big misconceptions is that people don't see anything being built, so they do not think Capital Metro is on track, Whited said. Construction started in 2006 and a good example is the Leander Park and Ride.

Construction has started on three projects along the rail line. Last July, Capital Metro approved a \$711,000 contract for the Leander rail station, which opened Monday.

They approved contracts for two more projects in October, including a 2,000 ft. \$5.5 million overpass on McNeil Road where MetroRail crosses the Union Pacific track, and the construction of the rail station at Lakeline Boulevard and Lyndhurst Street for \$914,000.

Projects down the line include eight more stations, but Capital Metro has not yet executed the contracts for these projects.

Work on the first six rail cars has also begun. Capital Metro signed an initial \$32.3 million contract with a Swiss rail manufacturer for six cars with an option of adding 12 more cars in the future. Each car is self-propelled by two diesel-electric engines.

These particular cars are quieter than other commuter rail systems and are environmentally friendly, so noise and vibration should not be a problem, Whited said.

The areas that the MetroRail cuts through are already crossed by freight trains carrying construction equipment and gravel, which will continue to run outside of peak commuter hours.

Rail as an investment

A major concern in 2004 was if ridership would justify the amount spent on commuter rail. Capital Metro's most recent numbers estimate there will be 1,700 to 2,000 trips taken per day on the MetroRail.

We feel that even those who are not ever going to ride the MetroRail are still going to benefit from less cars on the road and less air pollution, Whited said. Over time, as the rail becomes more common, more people will ride. Regional population growth is going to double in the next 25 years, so this is a plan that will accommodate that future.

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