



Suburban Rail Carries the Day in Austin

In November, voters in Austin approved a commuter rail line, 62 percent to 38 percent, only four years after rejecting a light rail proposal, 50.5 to 49.5. Austin will now join Dallas and Houston in having rail transit. But Austin is taking a different path.

The Austin plan calls for diesel-powered railcars serving nine stations along a 32-mile rail line that Capital Metro already owns. Using existing tracks keeps costs low, but it also means the trains go where the tracks already are. The line does not go anywhere near the Capitol or the University of Texas, and the single downtown stop (at the convention center) is blocks away from the business district. Most passengers will need shuttle buses to get to their final destinations.

Like Houston's Main Street light rail line, Austin's commuter rail line is billed as a "starter" line, but it's much less of a start. Houston runs trains every six minutes during rush hour and 12 otherwise; Austin will have a train every 30 minutes during rush hour, with perhaps only a single mid-day run. Houston is boarding 30,000 people a day; Austin expects 2,000.

But the Austin line will cost only \$60 million—one-fifth as much as Houston's. That was Capital Metro's strategy: win over voters put off by the \$1 billion price tag of the 2000 plan. It worked, but it's an interesting counterpart to the METRO Solutions plan in Houston, which passed narrowly in 2004 by building support in the central city. An *Austin Chronicle* commentary before the 2000 election said that the alternative to rail was Austin becoming like Houston—in other words, suburban sprawl. Now Austin is building a rail line to help suburbanites commute into

the city, while Houston is building a system that connects inner neighborhoods.

Many rail proponents reluctantly backed the commuter rail proposal, convinced it was not enough but hoping that it will lead to more. Capitol Metro will study extensions. Some are obvious, like a spur into the mixed-use redevelopment on the old airport site and a downtown extension. But the diesel trains are not as well suited to an urban, street-running line, and the fear remains that if the original line fails to stand on its own, it may doom future rail plans.

Capital Metro's plan is expedient, but it's not visionary. In that sense, it is symbolic of a bigger shift in Austin politics. As Joel Barna noted in 2002 ("The Rise and Fall of Smart Growth in Austin," *Cite* 53), a political consensus built in Austin in the late 1990s to encourage denser development in the inner city as an alternative to sprawl fell apart with the tech bust. Light rail was part of that Smart Growth vision; future rail corridors on busy streets like South Congress and Guadalupe were shown on the city's planning maps.

But many in the inner city did not want growth; some environmentalists opposed rail for that reason. Austin grew anyway, and it has continued sprawling. Now the political debates center on building more highways to deal with traffic jams in the suburbs. In July, the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization approved a plan calling for \$2.2 billion in new toll roads that essentially will double the area's freeway network in 20 years. Transportation spending is an investment in a vision of the future; Austin seems to be choosing sprawl. — *Christof Spieler*

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