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METROPOLITAN TRANSIT AUTHORITY

Agencies discuss commuter rail plan for Hempstead Highway

Plan would provide relief for commuters when work on U.S. 290 begins

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A Metropolitan Transit Authority project team has launched discussions with the Texas Department of Transportation about building a commuter rail line on Hempstead Highway in time to provide relief for commuters when a massive reconstruction project gets under way in the U.S. 290 corridor in the next three to four years.

John Haley, Metro's project manager, said Metro is focusing on potential commuter rail projects that could be implemented in the next two to four years. U.S. 290 provides one of those opportunities because the Texas Department of Transportation has set aside a 50-foot corridor on Hempstead Highway for high-capacity transit in the U.S. 290/Hempstead Highway reconstruction project plans.

"It is in everyone's best interest to have transit alternatives when the highway is under construction," Haley said. "How we get to that point is what we are talking about."

TxDOT officials said they are at the table and ready to hear Metro's plans.

"We have always been geared toward making use of the right-of-way for mass transit," said Steve Hrnccir, a project manager on the U.S. 290 program management team. "If they can make use of the right-of-way sooner, then we are all for it."

"It will take cars off the road and give people an alternative to sitting in traffic on 290."

Several residents who spoke out at July 2007 public hearings on that proposed U.S. 290/Hempstead Highway reconstruction project said they did not understand why the Texas Department of Transportation was not including a light rail or commuter rail system in their plans.

TxDOT's \$4 billion highway reconstruction project will revamp U.S. 290 and Hempstead Highway in stages from the U.S. 290/Loop 610/Interstate 10 interchange to FM 2920 near Waller. TxDOT is awaiting environmental approval from the Federal Highway Administration before buying land needed for the road project.

The project plan includes widening the congested Northwest Freeway and building a toll-road facility with free frontage lanes on the parallel Hempstead Highway. Space is set aside on Hempstead Highway for a possible commuter rail or light-rail line and stations, but TxDOT's project plans do not include construction of a mass-transit system.

Haley said the project team is evaluating where the commuter rail line could be constructed in the U.S. 290/Hempstead Highway corridor. They will focus at first on the section of road between

20080218APD00002

Beltway 8 and Loop 610, or the Northwest Transit Center, he said. Running a commuter rail line to downtown would prove to be more of a challenge, but there are options.

Haley said the Metro team will suggest a different location for the mass transit corridor than is outlined in current TxDOT project plans. Under the existing plan, a commuter rail project could not be built until after the road project was completed because the proposed 50-foot-wide corridor is located on Hempstead Highway.

Haley said if the proposed mass-transit corridor could be shifted 35 feet to the north on Hempstead Highway, then a commuter rail project could launch sooner than later.

He said they would also talk with Union Pacific Railroad officials about the possibilities of putting commuter rail on the existing tracks or on UPRR right-of-way located next to the existing tracks.

"We need to have it (commuter rail) up and running when the roadways are under construction," Haley said.

Hrcncir said TxDOT's environmental study "final environmental impact statement" did not analyze the impacts of a light-rail or commuter rail system, so a separate study would be required if any federal dollars are used to fund a Metro project.

Haley said in the coming months Metro's team would work to define an alignment and sites for potential stations, select the best method of high-speed technology to move commuters, and work with TxDOT and the Harris County Toll Road Authority on the location for a commuter rail system in the corridor.

Haley said once the team maps out a project and projects its price tag, the proposal would compete with other "Metro Solutions" project for funding. In November 2003, voters approved a \$7.5 billion Metro transit-expansion referendum, which provides funding for light-rail and rail expansion projects, new bus route and street construction and maintenance projects.

This spring Metro will launch several projects that will add spokes on to the downtown light-rail spine line.

Rowden said Chamber members would continue lobbying for a commuter rail system on U.S. 290 from downtown to Bryan-College Station and possibly to Hearne.

The Chamber's coalition has been lobbying for a U.S. 290 passenger rail line for years, and recently applauded UPRR's U.S. 290 railroad corridor's designation as one of the top five candidates for a commuter rail system in the Houston region in the Harris-Galveston Area Council's Regional Commuter Rail Connectivity Study.

The study will determine the most feasible railroad corridors in the region for commuter rail implementation in conjunction with freight rail service on those corridors.

The HGAC project team is conducting ridership forecast studies on those top rail corridors and calculating how much it would cost to build and operate a commuter system on each corridor.

Earl Washington, HGAC project manager, said the study results will be presented to the public in April.

"We will turn the results over to elected officials and the general public and let them decide whether they want it or not," Washington said. "It is within their power to make it happen."

Metro, TxDOT and the Gulf Coast Freight Rail District would be candidates to implement the commuter rail projects.

Metro's project manager