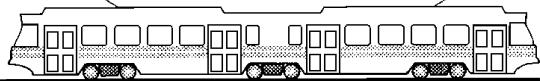
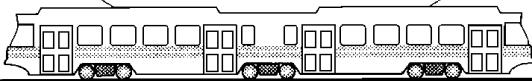


Citizens For Efficient Mass Transit



Summer 2006

Vol. 9, Issue No. 4

Five-Year Delay for Independence Busway

Some think it's a win, others not so sure

At their September meeting the Metropolitan Transit Commission offered a motion, which was approved by their board by an 8 to 1 vote, that final action on implementing a busway on the Southeast (Independence) Corridor be delayed for at least 5 years. During that time further study of the feasibility of light rail would be conducted. However the negative side of the equation, for those championing the cause of light rail, is that the MTC decided to designate bus rapid transit (busway) as their "locally preferred alternative". This means the MTC is sending a record of decision to the Federal Transit Administration in Washington stating that they have officially selected a busway over light rail in the Southeast Corridor. It could make it very difficult a secure a change to light rail without massive evidence to support a switch, and the political will to make it happen. Ralph Messera, speaking on behalf of Matthews Mayor Lee Myers, introduced a substitute motion asking that the MTC adopt light rail now as their locally preferred alternative for the Southeast Corridor. The motion received the support of board members in Pineville and Mint Hill, but was defeated by a 6 to 3 vote.

For those of us that were encouraged by the decision, we see the delay as a window of opportunity to gather more facts and figures in support of our claim that light rail is by far the better choice in the Southeast. We believe that we have already made a start in that direction by presenting documents supplied by the national organization Light Rail Now, and by information submitted by well-known transit expert E. L. Tennyson.

Although 5 years may seem like a long time it is not because our task will be difficult and, as usual, against great odds. The tendency will be to relax and fall asleep. We can not afford to let that happen. By CATS' own admission the numbers are skewed by the FTA's requirement that the greater rider attraction of light rail can not be used when submitting ridership projections. This despite a clear record that light rail does in fact attract greater ridership, and over 20 light rail lines in North America from which to obtain those records. In addition to that the FTA refuses to allow submission of such facts as the greater transit oriented development that comes with light rail. To use the analogy of a card game, the FTA tells you that you can only play half the cards in the deck, then proceeds to tell you that you have a losing hand. This bias against light rail on the part of the FTA is a barely concealed fact. However we will save that subject for a future article.

Since the FTA controls the purse strings, at the present time we

have no choice but to try and jump over all the hurdles they have thrown in the path in an attempt to disqualify any transit agency that might be thinking about light rail. We need to now be thinking of ways to make light rail in the Southeast Corridor look more attractive and financially feasible. One that certainly needs to be explored further is designing a light rail route all the way through Uptown to the future Gateway Multi-modal Terminal, similar to the route CATS designed for their busway plans for the Southeast. The fact that they did this for their busway plans but not for light rail is in large part responsible for the somewhat fewer riders shown for light rail as opposed to the busway. It is important that any future

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Let's Not Overreact to Cost Overruns

In an excellent article in a recent Charlotte Observer, UNCC Chancellor Phillip Dubois argued against overreacting to the present cost overruns on the South Corridor light rail project. He said "let's not throw the baby out with the bath water." He went on to say light rail must be viewed as a long-term investment in the future of the Charlotte area. We could not agree more with his words.

Unfortunately, we have some far more short-sighted individuals, some in high places, such as Mecklenburg County Commissioner Jim Puckett, who would like to "do-over" transit funding, due to the cost overruns. We also have someone out there cranking up a web site to get signatures for a total repeal of the transit sales tax. We wonder if he knows or even cares what a repeal of the transit tax would do to our transit system. First of all the majority of the income from this tax goes into operating our bus system. This is the basic system that many people depend on to get them to work on a day-to-day basis. While we feel sure Mr. Puckett and our web site creator have their cars, a large number of transit riders either do not, or they have purposefully chosen not to use them.

Only about 30 or 40 per cent of the funds from the sales tax for transit are currently being used to support light rail construction. Who would be hurt the most if the transit tax were repealed? The basic transit rider. Who gets hurt when riders can't get to work? The economy of the city. So what

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Five Year Delay for Independence Busway

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Southeast Corridor light rail line serve the future Gateway terminal without the need to transfer Uptown, because this promises to be Charlotte's most important transit hub, and the point where a direct transfer can be made to the future North Corridor commuter rail line.

When it was suggested to CATS that the Southeast light rail line could be brought Uptown, the same as they were planning for their busway, they sighted a variety of reasons why it couldn't be done. Among them were wheel noise in the residential neighborhoods. This can be mitigated. They said sharp curves would be too much for the light rail cars to handle. Other cities are building light rail cars to fit the corridors they are planning, not trying to make the corridors fit the light rail cars. CATS said light rail cars were too big for 5th St., yet we understand they are planning to order the largest buses available for the busway, and operate them on 5th St. We are not even sure 5th St. is the best route through Uptown, although we understand it is the best place for an equipment connection with the existing South Corridor light rail line. However other streets through Uptown may well prove to be a better choice for regular operating service. We will be discussing them in a future article.

Now that we know that any future transitway, be it busway or light rail, will be placed in the median of Independence over a large part of its route, it should be easier to get developers to start thinking about locating their future transit oriented developments there. The problem is they may know the location, but they still don't know if it will be busway or light rail. The FTA and some busway advocates would like us to believe that will not make any difference to developers. Fine! Let them now go ahead with their developments as if they already know everything they need to know. On the other hand if they will only commit to develop if light rail is the choice they need to tell our city officials that is the case. They need to tell them early and often, and in no uncertain terms. They need to keep telling them until they are sure that the message has been received by city hall. We need to include these developers in our campaign for light rail from the beginning and work with them every step of the way.

More than a few people in the Southeast are not convinced that the MTC's decision to hold off on construction for 5 years has been a real benefit to them. They point to the fact that the NC DOT construction schedule for the Independence freeway only calls for it to reach as far as Conference Drive by 2009. They say CATS couldn't build much now even if they wanted to. They go on to say that the important thing is that the MTC has gone on record with the FTA in approving bus rapid transit as their locally preferred alternative, and changing that will be difficult at best.

We fully understand and appreciate their concern. However we hope people in the Southeast will not give up now, after having fought one long, hard battle after another, and won the

right to fight again. We need to remember we are not just fighting for light rail, but for the future of Southeast Charlotte and Matthews. Actually it is bigger than that, because when one large segment of the area is not doing well, it can not help but affect the future health of the entire Charlotte region. This battle is really not just for us, it is for everybody.

Overruns

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would happen if we could just cut out of the sales tax the portion that goes to building light rail? We build more roads – more and more roads everywhere, including your front yard if you happen to be unlucky enough to live on a major street. Soon the city of trees will become the city of a lot fewer trees. The very livable city will become the place many will pass up for a city with more intelligent ways to handle its growth.

What are we worried about! We couldn't follow this stupid course of action even if we wanted to do so. The federal government would stop us from destroying ourselves because we would violate their clean air standards. **We need to build these rapid transit lines or we need to stop growing. There is simply no third choice.** We are sure there are more than a few who would choose the "stop growing" course of action.

Unfortunately it seldom works that way. You either grow or you stagnate. When a city stagnates it slowly (sometimes rapidly) shrinks. Although there are those who would not even mind living in a stagnating, slowly shrinking city, we feel reasonably sure the vast majority of us would not. There are plenty of stagnating, shrinking cities out there for people who are fed up with growth and light rail.

Elsewhere in this newsletter we have talked about the cost overruns on the South Corridor light rail project. Most of these
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Citizens For Efficient Mass Transit



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Guess What? Roads Also Have Overruns!

Amid the constant attention the South Corridor light rail project has been given by the media, and the resulting reaction by the public, comes the news that two years ago NC DOT estimated there would be a \$29 billion dollar shortfall on money needed to fix the state's roads. Now they are saying they need \$65 million to do the job, more than double their estimate of only two years ago. The reason given for this cost overrun, "rapid inflation in the cost of concrete and steel". Sound familiar? It ought to, because it is the very same problem that helped to contribute to the sizable cost overruns on the light rail project.

Notice we are talking road cost overruns in the billions, not the millions we were talking about the light rail project. Notice we are talking about just fixing existing roads, not building new ones! Yet where is the furor over these far greater cost overruns? Where is the indignation from the radio talk show hosts and the letters to the editor when this is happening? Why were no new web sites created to stop wasteful highway spending, asking that we transfer road funding to more sensible things like building rapid transit lines? Is it possible we have a double standard here? One for roads – quite another for transit?

We are not trying to say the cost overruns NC DOT is experiencing are any different from those going on all over the country. In Chicago for example, the Dan Ryan Expressway, a 14-lane highway on the city's south side, is being rehabilitated. The original projections estimated the cost at \$550 million. Current estimates are that is will cost \$934 million, and before it is finished could exceed \$1 billion. We are only talking fixing an existing highway, not building a new one. We could have built 2 South Corridor light rail lines from the ground up for the cost of fixing this highway, and had money left over.

The truth is the huge increase in the cost of construction materials could probably not have been foreseen by either CATS, NC DOT or anyone else planning these large construction projects a few years ago. But these costs are only part, although a large part, of the reason for the cost overruns on the South Corridor. Two multimillion-dollar overpasses

What Would Happen If We Stopping Building Light Rail?

In reality we really can't stop our planning for rapid transit lines because if we depended solely on highways to commute in Charlotte we would be certain to violate federal clean air standards. But let's suppose for a moment that we do repeal our half-cent sales tax for transit, take all the money and build more roads with it, as some people think we should do. The half-cent sales tax for transit is currently generating about \$65 million dollars annually. Having killed public transit, or at the very least set it back about 20 years, we are now going to need to build a lot more streets, and widen the ones we already have.

Where is the money to do all this going to come from? It is currently estimated the state of North Carolina has a \$65 billion dollar shortfall in funding its roads. Even if Charlotte were to

were added to the project because traffic had increased so dramatically grade crossings were considered unacceptable.

But how can something added to the original project be considered a cost overrun? It is an added cost, but not a cost overrun. How about comparing one of those light rail overpasses to some of our highway overpasses. On the southwest side of Charlotte the I-77 / I-485 interchange cost \$30 million to build back in the 1990's. The new I-77 / I-485 interchange in north Charlotte is estimated to cost about \$40 million. Just as important as the cost however is the fact that both these interchanges will probably take a couple hundred acres of land permanently out of the tax rolls. Due to the design of these limited access highways these overpasses will probably take 8 or 10 times the amount of land compared to that needed for the light rail overpasses. These are but two examples of the wasteful use of valuable urban property that comes with road construction.

There are however other costs on the light rail project that could have been controlled more carefully, and these are probably the only ones that could justifiably be criticized. These were the costs related to design errors, some of which could be traced back to Parsons, the engineering firm that was hired to oversee the coordination of the various subcontractors involved in the project. However, the ultimate responsibility must rest with CATS.

While we feel the vast majority of the cost overruns on the light rail project were unavoidable, we do have concern for those that could have been handled better. Our concern is that any transit money that is wasted on this project will mean that much less money we have to spend on future transit projects. Does this mean we should stop building our rapid transit corridors or repeal the sales tax earmarked for transit? Ridiculous! Of course not. (See "Let's not over-react to cost overrun" elsewhere in this newsletter). We need these rapid transit corridors badly now, and we will need them even more in the future. There could not be a worse time than now to turn back the clock.

What Would Happen If We Stopping Building Light Rail?

get its fair share of road building funds from Raleigh, which it seldom does, you can imagine how much money that leaves the Charlotte region for highway construction. How can we afford to build and improve all these new roads when we can't even afford to fix the roads we have now? Don't think for a minute stealing all the money from the transit tax is going to do it! That little bit of cash would be swallowed up in the twinkling of an eye, given the insatiable appetite of the NCDOT highway division.

Where does all that leave the transit riders? Standing on the corner waiting for the bus that will never come. Those of you who own a car and use the bus better get used to paying those

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What Would Happen If We Stopping Building Light Rail?

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high gas prices again. For those of you that don't maybe you can get in a car pool, or take a taxi. Can't afford a taxi every day? Maybe you should think about filing for you unemployment compensation.

What about transit oriented development now that there is little or no transit left? Don't count on more highways to provide any. Highways are sure to get you another kind of development however. It's known as urban sprawl. Without transit you can now count on plenty of that!

What else would happen if we repeal the transit tax? We could confidently place ourselves 10 years behind Raleigh, which at the present time is about 10 years behind us, because they have failed to find any funding mechanism that would provide adequate money to improve their transit system. To a large extent that is why their Triangle Transit Authority failed, at least for now, in their attempt to build a commuter rail system between Raleigh and Durham.

There is also the concern over Charlotte's image in the eyes of the rest of the nation. Should we eliminate or severely cripple our transit system, at a time when most cities are expanding their's? Right now we have the image of a "New South", progressive city, and a desirable place in which to live. If voters repeal the transit tax that image will certainly take a severe beating. What is likely to follow is a decision on the part of the country's leading companies to pass over Charlotte when they think about locating or relocating businesses. You guessed it, what follows that is a sizable loss of high quality jobs, causing the city as a whole to suffer.

All things considered, repealing the half cent sales tax for transit should take us back to the "good old days" of the 1960's and 1970's, when we were bound hand and foot to our

automobile for everything we did, when sidewalks disappeared because nobody walked and we were afraid to cross the street, downtown started to decay in favor of those shopping centers, and the air started to look noticeably hazier. One or two of the features of those days that won't be coming back however will be the cheap gas and the cheap roads. If you think paying for mass transit is expensive, wait until you've paid for all the roads you're going to need. Have fun! As for me I'll be living somewhere that is not in this time warp.

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were probably unavoidable costs due to rapid inflation. There were some mistakes due to lack of oversight in engineering and the co-ordination of work projects. We think we should now have learned from our past mistakes and this knowledge will cut down on them in the future. Now is the time to move forward, not backward.

We apologize for the delay in our summer newsletter. All of our available time and resources late this summer went into winning a delay in a decision on the implementation of a busway in the Southeast Corridor, and our ongoing effort to win approval for modern streetcar as the locally preferred alternative in the West Corridor. Since these decisions were up for action by the MTC in August it was necessary to concentrate all our efforts on this if we had any chance of victory.

We now plan to concentrate our efforts on getting our newsletter back on schedule, with our Fall edition coming out soon. We thank you for your patience! We pledge to work just as hard to win the best transit possible for the other corridors in the future.

Your Membership Will Help Us Help You!

Please help us continue our fight for the best possible transit system for the Charlotte area. Become a member of Citizen's for Efficient Mass Transit. We are a totally volunteer, non-profit organization.

Your membership entitles you to one year of the quarterly CEMT Newsletter and occasional news releases. We monitor all public transit meetings. Please take a minute to help us keep you informed. Thank you!

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