

OnTrack with Transit

Issue #1

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A Message from Austan Librach

Welcome to the inaugural issue of **OnTrack**, a new communication initiative from COA staff to the City Manager's Office and City Council. This newsletter will be published on a frequent schedule at least until the November election, and will cover a set list of rail related topics, focusing on specific subjects in each issue. As new information emerges, we will provide updates and analysis. The purpose is to provide both factual information and analysis as well as to communicate more speculative ideas that are circulating in Austin and the region and what these may represent. We will refer to these latter items as '*Sidings*'.



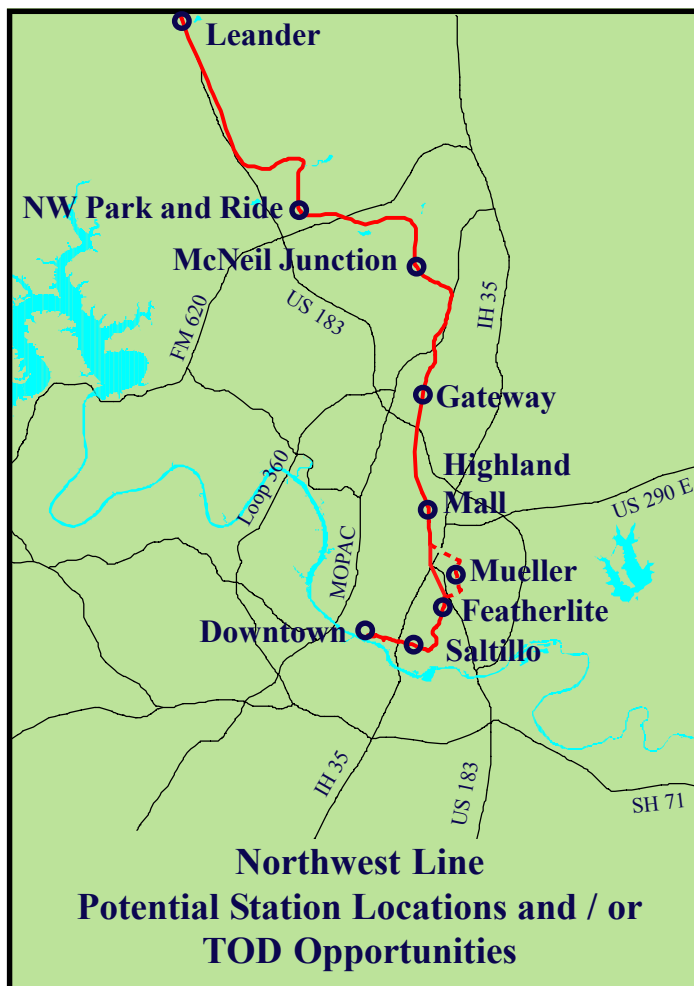
As Capital Metro moves forward with their **All Systems Go!** long range planning initiative, and a probable referendum in November and plans for regional commuter rail and Transit Oriented Developments progress, we will be providing updates, technical information and analysis of what these new transit initiatives mean to the City of Austin and the region. City staff continue to work closely with Capital Metro, The Austin-San Antonio Commuter Rail District (ASAIRD), rail consultants and others on a variety of transit, transportation and planning initiatives. We will be profiling these activities and other independent initiatives in upcoming issues of this periodic newsletter.

In each issue of **OnTrack** you will find a sidebar listing all the topics to be covered, with current issue subjects highlighted. In this first issue of **OnTrack**, we are focusing mostly near Downtown, from Saltillo to Seaholm. We hope you find the contents of **OnTrack** informative, interesting and useful. If you have any questions on the topic areas or specific content, or would like to make suggestions for future coverage, please feel free to contact me.

Austan Librach, P.E., AICP
 Director,
 Transportation, Planning and Sustainability Department

Station Area Planning and Transit Oriented Development (TOD)

Some station area planning, at least at a conceptual level, has already occurred in Austin. The **Seaholm District Master Plan** is, to a great extent, a station area plan and some of the small sites studied through **Envision Central Texas** also focused on transit stations. During the Rapid Transit Project, TPSD staff lead a station area planning initiative in conjunction with NPZD and Capital Metro staffs and consultants in neighborhoods along the Central Line (Lamar / Guadalupe) rail alignment. The Crestview / Wooten, Brentwood / Highland and Central Austin Combined Neighborhood Plans all contain chapters on the station area planning conducted as part of those plans. This effort remains relevant under **All Systems**



Go!, since the corridor studied will become a Rapid Bus corridor, and the proposed station locations will likely remain the same. While the functional characteristics of urban rail and bus stations are quite different, the issues of access and adjacent land uses are much the same.

Capital Metro has retained **Calthorpe and Associates** to study TOD potential along the **Northwest Line** (red line on map, this page) in coming months.

ROMA Design Group is currently working on the **Saltillo District Redevelopment Master Plan**, a joint project of Capital Metro and the City of Austin. After gathering information and initiating the public involvement process, ROMA's first task was to examine the alignment of the rail line and the **Lance Armstrong Bikeway** through the District. The rail currently runs down the middle of the 11-acre redevelopment parcel owned by Capital Metro. The Lance Armstrong Bikeway was intended to run along side the rail, and stakeholders preferred an off-street trail as opposed to bike lanes striped on the street. After examining a number of different scenarios for combinations of rail and bikeway alignments in-street and off-street, along both 4th and 5th Streets, and extensive consultation with Capital Metro and City staff, the Community Advisory Group and other stakeholders, ROMA has developed a recommendation that allows the process to move forward.

Once redevelopment of the District is undertaken, ROMA recommends that 5th Street be expanded to accommodate one travel lane in each direction, either side of a central median that would be exclusively reserved for two urban commuter rail tracks. Major north-south streets would be able to cross the median and standard traffic control devices used for urban rail would be installed. The Lance Armstrong Bikeway would be an off-street trail running along the north side of 4th Street, with a landscape strip separating it from the sidewalk and street between IH-35 and Plaza Saltillo. At Attayac, it would transition to 5th Street,

where it would become on-street bike lanes. ROMA has most recently begun to examine different scenarios for redevelopment intensity, including mix of uses, number of potential residential units and other community facilities, building scale and parking strategies. The Project team is working with the community to reach an agreement on the level of intensity that is appropriate and to develop strategies to achieve a high level of housing affordability.

A number of TOD projects are already underway in Austin in anticipation of future transit investments. Seaholm, Saltillo, RMMA and the Triangle all could be considered TODs even though Saltillo is the only area currently served by the Northwest Line.

For further information on the Saltillo District Redevelopment Master Plan, contact George Adams at 974-2146.

Capital Metro Studies

In preparation for the final long range plan and probable November referendum, Capital Metro is undertaking a number of studies and projects. In addition to the commuter rail planning being done by **URS**, **Calthorpe Associates** is examining station areas and potential TODs. **Hank Dittmar** will be assisting Cap Metro with market studies, including value capture of TODs for several station areas being considered.

Donald Newlands, a Portland OR based transit simulation expert has been working with TPSD staff as part of the station area planning initiative of the Rapid Transit Project to prepare video animations of transit stations. He will be completing his work in conjunction with production oversight by the **Sherry Matthews Agency**. In future issues we will be providing updates on the progress of these projects.



Proposed Saltillo District Alignments

Commuter Rail Alignment Scenarios and Connections

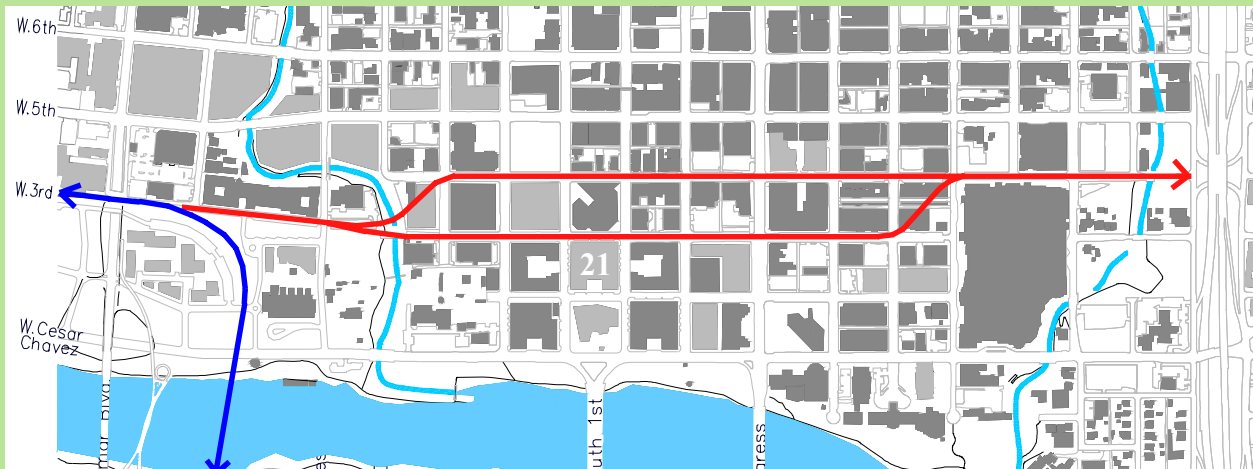
As part of the **All Systems Go!** workshops, Capital Metro asked for input from participants on a number of alignment modifications to their existing tracks. These include two curves in the **Robinson Ranch**, a connection to **Mueller**, an extension to **Seaholm**, and a **Downtown circulator** to distribute passengers from the commuter rail and Rapid Bus stations to other points in Downtown, the Capitol Complex and UT. At the **Downtown / Regional Kick-off Workshop** on June 10, participants overwhelmingly supported all of the extensions and alignment modifications. Most participants felt that an extension to Seaholm and a Downtown circulator of some kind were necessary for the success of the first phase of the system. Capital Metro has not confirmed that there will be any realignments or extensions of the Northwest Line.

Depending on the technology used, extending rail to Seaholm could have significant cost implications. This is because in-street rail construction is significantly more expensive than standard rail road construction, and two new bridges would be needed to cross Waller and Shoal Creeks. It is also likely that an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) would be required since there is not currently active rail

extending to Seaholm. In-street construction would also likely take longer to complete than the rest of the system. For these reasons Capital Metro staff will likely recommend that a Seaholm connection not be included in the first phase.

***Siding:** Some concerns have been raised with extending rail on 4th Street. This has prompted some to suggest that 3rd Street might be a more appropriate location for rail, since it currently has little development along it, and serves as sort of a “back alley” to Downtown. Third Street also has greater future development potential and is positioned to serve both the 2nd Street District and the Warehouse District equally.*

At one time, rail did exist on both 3rd and 4th Streets Downtown. Since construction of the Convention Center Expansion, rail entering Downtown on 4th Street can no longer transition to 3rd until west of Trinity Street. Some urban rail vehicles have a minimum 90' turning radius and can just make a tight 90 degree turn in the limited 80 foot right-of-ways of Downtown Austin. Operating on minimum radii is not necessarily desirable though, because it limits speed, increases noise and vibration and requires greater maintenance. The kind of Diesel Multiple Unit (DMU) vehicles Capital Metro envisions for the



Possible / Potential Downtown Rail Alignments

Northwest Line have much more limited turning radii. Currently available DMU vehicles require anywhere from 140' to 350' turning radii, which means they would have to transition between streets diagonally through a block. This transition to 3rd Street could be difficult because most blocks contain existing buildings, many of which are historically significant.

The Austin Transportation Study (1998) and the **Rapid Transit Project "Central Line"** planning (2003) recommended the transition between 4th Street Downtown and 3rd Street in the Seaholm District should occur west of Nueces, crossing Shoal Creek on the diagonal. Other suggestions have emerged that the connection between the Convention Center and Seaholm should occur with a different kind of vehicle, such as bus or streetcar, that can more easily negotiate streets and possibly develop 3rd Street as a Transit Mall similar to Denver or Portland. However, possible loss of ridership is a concern under this scenario. The highest density of employment Downtown is clustered along Congress Avenue, which is on the edge of a comfortable walk from either location. Transit transfers between modes, especially for short distances have a significant impact on ridership potential. Another factor is vehicle capacity. A single DMU vehicle contains more than three times as many seats as a typical bus or streetcar.

Seaholm Redevelopment

On May 17, 2003 the City of Austin released a Request for Qualifications and Redevelopment Concept (RFQ) for the Seaholm Power Plant. The RFQ is directed at private-sector developers that have the experience and financial capacity to undertake such an ambitious and complex project. The RFQ requests that Respondents partner with cultural entities to develop a primary public use for the Power Plant. Groups specifically identified in the RFQ include: the **Texas Music Hall of Fame, KLRU / Austin City Limits** and the **Austin Children's Museum**. The Redevelopment Concept portion of the RFQ requests submittal of a nonbinding concept for redevelopment

of the property and surrounding district, and specifically which cultural entities they wish to partner with, and how they would be accommodated within the Power Plant.

On June 23, a pre-response meeting and site tour was held. Approximately 70 people attended, and there was clearly a lot of excitement about the project. Many of the attendees were consultants hoping to network with prospective developers, but some development companies and representatives of the cultural entities also attended. What is never clear in such situations is how many and which developers are being represented by consultants and legal representatives. A second tour for respondents who were not able to attend the first tour is now being planned for later in July.

Bill Stotesbery, KLRU CEO was in attendance and announced that KLRU is very enthusiastic about being part of the Seaholm Project and are willing to provide letters of intent to any developer that can meet their needs and are willing to work with them.

The RFQ responses are due on August 20, the same day as the Block 21 RFP responses are due, so that they can be evaluated together. The staff recommendations for these solicitations will be presented to Council in October, following the budget sessions.

For further information on the Seaholm District, contact Greg Kiloh at 974-7836.

Comments or questions regarding **OnTrack** content and rail transit issues in general should be directed to Austan Librach at 974-2357 or Greg Kiloh at 974-7836.



OnTrack is a publication of the City of Austin.