



The Nor'westener



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Commuter Rail is the Proposal

We Can Have a Voice In Deciding If and When and Where

The Houston-Galveston Area Council (H-GAC) has scheduled a public meeting to gather feedback on it's recently completed Regional Commuter Rail Connectivity Study. The study produced actual recommendations for constructing the first stages of a Regional Commuter Rail system. Readers in the near-northwest area should note one proposal is to establish Commuter Rail along the 290 Corridor, a new Hub Terminal in the area near N.W. Mall/the N.W. Transit Center and rail routings partially along the old MKT property to downtown.

Date/Time/Location: **July 1, 6 p.m., 2nd floor/Room A, H-GAC building, 3555 Timmons Lane.**

A copy of the study may be reviewed on-line at: <http://www.hgaccommuterrail.com/docsmaps.htm>
The Executive Summary on that web page will provide a study overview with successive Chapters and Appendixes bringing more extensive study details.

The public comment period for the proposals will extend from July 1 until July 30, but the actual number of people attending the July 1 public meeting and commenting concerning one part or aspect of the Commuter Rail proposal may well influence decision makers' choices on how to proceed or not proceed. Speaking with consultants in attendance at that meeting, reviewing displays and listening to the planned presentation will help us in making informed comments. Be sure to submit your then informed written comments at the meeting or later during the comment period.

With the overall general decrease in Houston's major crime rate and the recent spike in energy prices it is not surprising to learn that transportation is now the number one issue on Houston citizens' minds these days. Houston, unlike almost all other cities, is fortunate to have an existing rail infrastructure that radiates into the surrounding areas from our city's central area. The H-GAC commissioned study of commuter rail alternatives has revealed existing under-utilized freight rail lines and abandoned right-of-ways that can form significant portions of the core of a commuter rail system. By utilizing these existing assets a basic Commuter Rail system could be up and operating much more quickly than would otherwise be possible. There are three potential Commuter Rail routings being proposed at a total cost to fully implement of \$2.9 billion dollars. Extending Commuter Rail from the Cypress/Waller area down the 290 corridor ultimately routing into downtown is one of the three proposed projects. From downtown to Clear Lake/Galveston is another and the last routes generally northward from downtown toward the Highway 249/Tomball area.

For readers who experienced the years-long series of meetings over the highway construction aspects of the 290 Corridor (West Loop/Hempstead Rd./U.S. 290), the quickness of the decisions on rail may well take your breath away. Harris County Judge Ed Emmett spoke a year ago at a 290 Passenger Rail Coalition meeting and said a basic commuter rail could be established along the portions of the 290 corridor outside Loop 610 prior to the beginning of construction on the West Loop/Hempstead/U.S. 290 highways - if there was the political will and public support. Given Emmett's years of experience as an international transportation consultant I'll not argue with the man's estimated timeframe, nor his obvious desire to offer commuters in that corridor an alternative to traveling U.S. 290/Hempstead/West Loop during their construction. The Harris County Toll Road Authority web site still indicates a Spring 2010 begin date for construction of the Hempstead Rd. portion of the 290 Corridor project. Do the math and we are looking at a possible decision and begin work within months – not years. As the Judge and many others have said; it will come down to public interest and support.

What follows will be insufficient to make any final decisions or comments, but will hopefully provide a bit of useful information with a focus upon the 290 Corridor.

Commuter Rail/Light Rail

What is Commuter Rail?



Photo: H-GAC The "Coaster" San Diego, CA

Commuter Rail is heavy rail as pictured in the photo to the left. Think along the lines of AMTRAK scale, even double-decker, passenger equipment. Commuter rail best carries passengers over relatively longer distances - 40 or 50 miles - and makes very few stops, once every five miles or so. It typically operates with flourishes of trips during peak a.m. and p.m. travel times and does not generally operate during off-peak hours.

Photo: Metro

Light Rail such as Metro is currently focusing upon, is for more local travelers – up to 10 miles or so – and makes stops every mile or so - or more frequently - and has expanded hours of operation compared to Commuter Rail. The Houston Metro train pictured to the right is a good example of Light Rail.



The 290 Plan

The graphics on the next pages, each taken from the H-GAC study, will reveal part of the conceptual planning for the 290 Corridor route in the near-northwest area and the routing toward downtown. Basically an initial rail terminal is proposed to be constructed literally opposite the N.W. Mall on the far side of Hempstead Rd. As construction on the West Loop proceeds parcels of lands, some *already owned at that point* by TXDOT as a

result of the West Loop expansion, would be utilized to then construct a full Transit Hub as close as possible to the existing METRO Northwest Bus Transit Center (See ES-15 below).



Figure ES-15: Potential Hub Site 1 Track Layout

Homeowners nearest the proposed Hub Terminal will be keenly interested in the impact upon the immediate area. We have chatted about the area impact before, but graphic ES-16 below, reveals the areas of expected redevelopment if the Hub Terminal is built. Views seen by this writer in other presentations reveals that high-density housing, businesses and mixed-use development can and probably would occur immediately adjacent to the Hub Terminal.

Timing on the construction of Commuter Rail inside the Loop is, I believe, a bit more problematic (see Graphic ES-1 on Page 4). Plans call for utilizing portions of the Eureka Rail Yard, part of the length of the city-owned old MKT right-of-way then turning south generally along Yale Street to existing freight lines south of I-10 to route toward downtown. The routing avoids newly dividing communities that are not already divided by existing rail and avoids passing through the major portion of the Heights as those folks have adamantly said they do not want rail passing through their community.

One consideration in the project is the proposal to locate a Rail Storage and Maintenance facility in the existing UP Eureka rail yard. I'll suggest something that might be commented upon by neighbors near that proposed facility: The location best not be the site for heavy rail maintenance and other loud maintenance activities. Heavy rail maintenance activities, as contrasted to routine maintenance activities (cleaning



Figure ES-16: Potential Redevelopment Impact Area of Hub Sites 1 & 2



Figure ES-1: West Access and South Access to North Intermodal Terminal Loop

trains out between trips etc) are quite noisy and may well be carried out at night. Such activity in close proximity to area homes would not seem to be a wise decision for those living near by – but then that will best be commented upon by the stakeholders that live near to the proposed site.

Hike and Bike advocates will, of course, be concerned that routing Commuter Rail along the MKT property will eliminate their proposed/promised trail along the property. But, there is a city ordinance in place spelling out that a hike and bike trail will exist along the corridor. The strip of old MKT property is City owned. Whoever actually builds Commuter Rail or any rail along the MKT property will have to deal with the City to gain usage of the land. Rail and Bike Trails do exist along the same corridor in other parts of the country so bikers will have to make their case known as necessary that the proposed Bike Trail is to remain as part of the plan along the MKT portion of the property. There have been some concerns voiced on how the proposed Bike Trail extending from downtown that now is projected to end on the MKT property at Hempstead Rd. inside the Loop would be connected to the Bike Trail routing down the U.S. 290 Corridor outside the Loop. Bike enthusiasts might put some thought into incorporating such a connection as part of the proposed rail project. Neighbors in West Timbergrove and Lazybrook wishing principally off-road bike routings to tie into these main bike transit lanes best begin looking for and working on connector routes now least they be left with nothing more than narrow striped bike lanes adjacent to ever more busy roadways to travel upon. Cars and trucks and bikes sharing common roadways really do not mix well at all.

As I indicated earlier, this is far from a comprehensive article, but hopefully it may stimulate a bit of additional research by some and hopefully will encourage attendance at the July 1 meeting by a few. The message is clear this will not happen without public support. The ball is in our court.

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