

Coalition urges Cap Metro to add streetcars to ballot Downtown lines seen as boost to commuter rail plan

BYLINE: Ben Wear, AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF &

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A coalition of business, civic and environmental groups today will call on Capital Metro to add downtown Austin streetcars to its passenger rail plans for a probable November election.

Connect Austin, which includes the Downtown Austin Alliance and Liveable City among seven sponsors, will suggest at a noontime news briefing that the transit agency ask voters for approval to build two streetcar lines in addition to the 32-mile, \$60 million to \$80 million commuter rail line planned from Leander to the Austin Convention Center.

The streetcars, running on tracks embedded in the pavement along Third Street and from Palmer Auditorium to the University of Texas, would share lanes with cars.

Adding the streetcar proposal to the November ballot might invigorate Central Austin voters, a reliable constituency for public transit that some local political veterans have said might shy away from a commuter rail proposal designed to serve the suburbs. But adding streetcars, close cousins of light rail that run on city streets and are powered by electricity, would increase the cost of what has been a bare-bones, foot-in-the-door proposal and might provide political fodder to rail opponents.

"People like streetcars. People will ride streetcars," said Mark Yznaga, a former political consultant and board member of Liveable City, which has former Council Members Brigid Shea and Bill Spelman on its board. "We think it would really enhance the commuter rail project because it would give people a way to get around downtown."

The Capital Metro board is expected to call the election at its Aug. 30 meeting and set the underlying "notice of election" that constitutes what voters would be asked to approve. The exact elements of that notice are subject to change until then.

Connect Austin, formed this summer, is only one of several groups that have been sharing transit thoughts with Capital Metro in recent days. The Real Estate Council of Austin has asked Capital Metro to set aside more than \$100 million for future commuter lines.

The executive committee of the Greater Austin Chamber last week approved a list of "guiding principles" for reviewing the final commuter rail proposal. And the Downtown Austin Alliance has been urging Capital Metro to extend the downtown terminus of the commuter line from the Convention Center westward to Congress Avenue or to the Seaholm Power Plant.

Capital Metro, in a series of community workshops this spring, got the message that its commuter line will need to have "circulator" systems at various points to move passengers to and from the stations. The most important of those figures to be downtown, where, as currently envisioned, the commuter rail line would

terminate just three blocks west of Interstate 35. Capital Metro officials have indicated that they intend to have buses handy at the terminus and at important destinations such as the Capitol complex and UT.

But the members of Connect Austin worry that commuters in sufficient numbers won't be willing to go from the train to a bus and vice versa, no matter how handy. They worry that, if so, commuter rail ridership will be a disappointment, dooming future passenger rail efforts. And unless Central Austin voters see a reason to support the plan in November, even the single commuter rail line might never get off the ground.

Costs of a streetcar system are a bit of a mystery at this point. The Connect Austin Web site notes that recent streetcar expansions in Portland, Ore., and Tampa, Fla., cost between \$12 million and \$14 million a mile, then estimates that Austin could build the 3 1/2 miles of streetcars it proposes, including the vehicles, for about \$10 million a mile. But Capital Metro has not studied the proposal, which came up only in the past few weeks. And the agency, which does not have authority from voters to incur debt and does not intend to ask for it this fall, might be hard pressed to come up with that additional \$35 million or more.

"It's a very good suggestion, but we couldn't do it before the election because it's going to be quite time-consuming (to study) and probably fairly expensive," said Capital Metro board member Fred Harless, mayor pro tem of Lago Vista. "But I'm quite willing to look at it."

bwear@statesman.com; 445-3698