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Austin American-Statesman

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City, Cap Metro nearing official urban rail endorsement

Posted: 8:30 p.m. Tuesday, June 17, 2014

By [Ben Wear](#) - American-Statesman Staff

A few days from what will almost certainly be votes endorsing an urban rail proposal, Austin City Council members and Capital Metro board members nonetheless had a few pointed questions about aspects of that notional 9.5-mile line.

At a meeting Tuesday, they said they wanted to know more about why the electric-powered, double-tracked rail line shouldn't extend to the airport, about how Capital Metro could afford to operate urban rail without gutting existing bus service and about a possible tunnel near Hancock Center.

Council Member Bill Spelman cut to the political heart of the rail proposal, which won't become reality unless Austin voters approve as much as \$700 million in bonds to build it.

"What can be accomplished by spending that money on a train that can't be accomplished by spending on roads?" Spelman, who supports the rail plan, asked Project Connect rail director Kyle Keahey. "I think

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Kyle Keahey, rail director for Project Connect, left, gives a briefing during a joint meeting of the Austin City Council and ... [Read More](#)

this is the question we're going to have to answer the most over the next few months."

Keahey said Austin, essentially a once-medium-sized city that over the past generation has sprouted into a metropolis, doesn't have a street network that can accommodate that growth.

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"We don't have any six-lane roads," Keahey said. "We have a lot of four-lane roads that have never been expanded. To do that, you would have to have lots of acquisitions of property with displacement of people. What rail can do is operate within existing rights of way on roads that can handle both the traffic and rail.

"The conversation needs to be about moving people as opposed to moving cars," he said.

The Capital Metro board Monday will vote on a resolution declaring that the proposed rail route,

which would run from Highland Mall, through the University of Texas and downtown, then along East Riverside Drive to Grove Boulevard, is

Austin's "locally preferred alternative." The council will take a similar vote three days later on June 26.



Austin Council Member Kathie Tovo asks questions Tuesday at the Austin Convention Center during a joint meeting of the council and ... [Read More](#)

Based on the discussion Tuesday, as well as multiple other meetings over the past couple of years, the \$1.4 billion rail proposal likely will sail through both bodies without opposition.

That declaration that rail is Austin's official choice is required

under federal law for rail projects that hope to get a Federal Transit Administration grant. The affirmation will kick off what likely would be at least a three-year, detailed planning process for urban rail, beginning with an environmental impact analysis and ending, officials hope, with the feds agreeing to kick in the remaining \$700 million.

But all of that will be contingent on what voters choose Nov. 4 on the bonds. The council is expected to vote Aug. 7, or shortly thereafter, to put the rail proposal on the ballot, commingling it with something close to \$200 million more for road projects.

Council Member Mike Martinez suggested Tuesday that it might be better to extend the line from Grove to Austin-Bergstrom International Airport, cutting off the north end at Hancock Center. Such a plan, he said, could hold greater appeal for the public in November.

"I don't see how a park-and-ride lot at the airport could be any less successful than one at Grove, which is basically in the middle of nowhere," Martinez said.

Keahey said that Project Connect, a joint rail effort of the city and Capital Metro, had "not really examined going to the airport." But he said that in other places, the primary ridership base for rail lines to airports are employees, not passengers. Here, he said, that's "a real low number."

As for the large cost associated with a proposed tunnel at Hancock Center, which would allow urban rail to cross under Capital Metro's MetroRail line and avoid freight trains that also use it, that could be lowered. He said the rail staff is looking at a possible rail overpass

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instead that could save as much as \$100 million.

During a discussion of whether the transit agency can afford to take on the line's initial \$22 million a year operating cost, Capital Metro Board Member John Langmore said a recently completed 20-year financial plan for the agency shows it is possible.

But it will require that Capital Metro abandon its longtime policy of buying buses with savings and annual revenue, and instead finance the purchases with debt, he said. At its peak, Langmore said, that debt could reach \$118 million.

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