

Citizens For Efficient Mass Transit



Spring 2002

Vol. 5, Issue No. 3

The North Corridor—Why So Slow?

One question seems to have been asked by more people than others in regard to planning for our new transit corridors. Can't we get trains running sooner to our Lake Norman communities? There was a plan to get some service running

by 2003. The idea behind this plan was to provide some limited rush hour service, using temporary facilities, while the widening of I-77 was taking place. This would relieve some of the pressure on I-77 during construction and give drivers an alternative to sitting in long lines. When NCDOT decided to move up the I-77 project it unfortunately became apparent that there was no way commuter rail service could be started before the highway widening got underway (already begun, actually). Therefore the urgency to get this stop-gap service underway was no longer there. The North Corridor planning process therefore dropped back to its original schedule, which was opening in 2006. However, because of a six month delay on all the transit corridors it now appears more likely that trains won't run before 2007.

Why so long, many have asked. There's a little used track out here and they're not talking about light rail, which would require the construction of overhead wires. What has been most widely discussed for the North Corridor is some sort of regional or commuter rail. This would be either diesel locomotive hauled or self-propelled passenger car trains, operated mostly on existing tracks. It doesn't seem like it should take five to six years to get this going and maybe it shouldn't.

However we need to take a closer look at some of the problems that must be addressed before the trains can roll, and they are more than just a few. Maybe then we can get a better understanding about why things are not moving faster.

One: Following the guidelines set forth in order to get matching federal funding, a preferred mode of transit must be selected from various different alternatives. People in the North Corridor communities of Huntersville, Cornelius, Davidson and Mooresville have been solidly behind a rail mode of transit from the very beginning. But we must still go through the necessary process and formalize the results before moving forward. After this are the steps that must be followed leading up to a preliminary engineering, the phase the South Corridor is now in, to be considered for federal funding. Federal funding is very important because the one-half cent sales tax ear-marked for transit does not bring in nearly enough money to pay the cost of all these proposed transit corridors. Following all this procedure however can be time consuming.

Two: CATS is negotiating with the Norfolk Southern

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Skimpy Station Shelters at Future Stops?

Looking at the preliminary design for the south corridor light rail station shelters, it looks like there is going to be very little "shelter" in the shelters. The canopies shown in the recent issue of CATS *South Transitions* looks like they would not protect more than a half dozen passengers at each of the two shelters shown. We liked the "tree design" chosen, but the length of the canopies needs to be longer or there needs to be more of them on each of the platforms. It is very possible we are only looking at one section of the platform in the graphic, rather than the total of what is at each stop.

We hope that what is being designed here in Charlotte is not a copy of light rail shelters in Southern California. What we are seeing in some of the illustrations reminds us of San Diego and Sacramento. While Charlotte's climate is milder than most northern cities, it does get cold and windy in the winter and better protection needs to be provided than is necessary in those semi-tropical climates. We need good wind breaks and canopies that actually protect people from rain and snow. Even the fancy bus shelters on the Tryon Street Mall apparently failed to do the job and they look about as substantial as some of the graphics we are seeing for our future light rail shelters.

If not enough money has been budgeted to do a more thorough job of building better shelters we need to look at ways to find the funding. One possibility might come from the \$30 million saved if Pineville makes the unwise decision to reject light rail. It would also be possible to add improved shelters at a later date, but it would also be less expensive and disruptive to do it now. Doing it later would also start off customer relations on a bad note.

We trust that what we are seeing is in fact "preliminary" and that careful consideration will be given to the protection of the riding public. Even though trains will be spaced no more than 15 minutes apart during peak travel periods, it could still be a long wait in the pouring rain or freezing cold.

Should we Stop Light Rail to Build I-485?

A recent issue of the Charlotte Business Journal carried an article in which a banking official is suggesting we halt construction on the south corridor light rail project in order to concentrate on completing I-485. John Silva, chief economist at Wachovia, believes building the outer belt might create

office and residential developments that someday might have need for light rail.

Encouraging urban sprawl will actually create the very type of development that has no use for light rail, while at the same time damage inner city neighborhoods that do depend on it. Mr. Silva claims to have an extensive background studying mass transit yet he makes some inaccurate statements and comes to some illogical conclusions. He tries to convince us that Charlotte is not ready for light rail. He is quoted as saying New York, Chicago and Atlanta have light rail, when in fact they have heavy rail systems. There is a big difference as heavy rail is almost totally grade separated, much higher capacity, and vastly more expensive. This is not what we are talking about here in Charlotte.

Mr. Silva is quoted as saying "Is this (light rail) something that is going to make money or be a tourist convenience that is heavily subsidized?" This is a strange statement for someone who has an "extensive background" studying mass transit, for he should know no mass transit system in the country makes money. His statements sound strangely like the words of our former city councilman, Don Reid.

Mr. Silva makes it sound like we must choose either light rail or I-485, when the two are completely separate issues. Charlotte's share of the \$348 million that is being spent to build the South Corridor light rail is for mass transit use only. None of this money could or should be spent building I-485. Have any of the 20 or more other cities around the country who are building or have already built light rail systems, cancelled projects to build another highway? We haven't heard of any! Having an alternative to more highways is the very reason these mass transit systems are being built.

Mr. Silva wants more facts regarding the South Corridor light rail project. We are wondering if he attended the dozens of public hearings that have been held over the course of the last couple years, where many of his questions were already answered. Additional meetings are planned.

Maximize the Usefulness of Transit Corridors

Elsewhere in this newsletter we have taken a look at Pittsburgh and compared the ridership and general public acceptance of light rail with that of busways. We have noted that light rail has achieved a better rate of success in attracting and holding ridership.

Recently released figures show a 35 per cent increase in vehicle registrations in Mecklenburg County. This is even greater than the 29 percent increase in population. In the same ten year period the average commuting time also increased about 4 minutes.

We're now in the process of selecting route structure and transit modes on four different transit corridors in the Charlotte area. Whatever is decided upon will pretty much cast in stone the transit system we will have for the next 75 to 100 years. If you doubt that, look to older systems such as New York and Chicago and you will see that their systems are fundamentally the same as laid out well over 100 years ago. Certainly there have been some changes and additions, but when the basic system was laid out it set the pattern for whatever was to follow.

We expect this will be no less true here in Charlotte. That is why it is so important that we do the right thing in the right place when building our transit corridors. First, let's consider doing the right thing. We know that even after building these transit corridors, traffic congestion will not disappear. It will only lessen the overall increase in congestion, and just as important, give people a choice. However if we want to get the maximum benefit from these transit corridors we need to choose the transit mode that will draw the greatest number of people out of their cars and onto mass transit. We feel strongly that the mode of choice should be light rail. Some will say busways are cheaper to build. To that, we answer: What good does it do to save money building a system when the end result will fail to maximize ridership? Isn't that the reason we are building it in the first place? Besides that, we are firmly convinced busways will actually end up costing more money because they cost more over the life of the system in operating and maintenance, wiping out any savings found in construction costs.

The second consideration we mentioned was building in the

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Busways vs Light Rail in Pittsburgh

What does this mean for Charlotte?

By Bob Bischoff

Since there are proposals for a combination of light rail and busways in Charlotte's future transit planning, we thought it might be a good idea to visit a city where both modes are presently operating. Martin Wheeler and I visited Pittsburgh in April to ride and study their transit system so that we could compare these two transit alternatives. We talked to local people who are knowledgeable about the history of transit in the Pittsburgh area, and we talked to past and present Port Authority transit employees.

There are currently three operating light rail lines in Pittsburgh, all running out of a short subway in the downtown area. All three lines serve different areas on the south side of the city. A fourth line in the Overbrook area is currently being rebuilt and is scheduled to open by the end of 2003.

There are three full-scale busways in Pittsburgh. The East Busway and the West Busway were built over the top of unused railroad right-of-way. By "full scale" we mean a busway which includes intermediate stops along its length, similar to light rail. Most busways in this country run on HOV type lanes on freeways, much the same as our busway on Independence Boulevard. They do not stop from the time they get on their special lanes until the time they get off. There has been an unfair comparison between their speed and light rail. Obviously, if you have your own lane and you don't stop to pick up any passengers you are going to make fast time. The

Maximize the Usefulness of Transit Corridors

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right place. Since these transit corridors are "fixed guideways" they obviously can't be moved from place to place. This is true of both rail and busways. This is not true of ordinary bus lines on city streets, that can and are often moved. The fixed transit corridor therefore is rightly regarded as a big commitment to a neighborhood. In closer-in urban neighborhoods along these transit corridors we are planning station stops with little or no parking. Around these stations we plan transit oriented development (TOD). These neighborhoods will be denser and include both residential and retail within easy walking distance. Charlotte has become a leader in planning for these liveable neighborhoods. We need to chose them carefully.

Let's not forget the reason we are building these transit corridors. It is not to save money on construction. It is to relieve as much congestion on our urban highways as possible, and to give people a transportation choice. Let's not lose sight of our ultimate goal!

question is how useful they are to the communities you zoom through.

There is a third full scale busway in Pittsburgh, the South Busway, part of which has been shared with light rail. The south Busway's original ridership estimates were for about 32,000 weekday passengers. It actually opened with about 20,000, and now handles about 14,500, according to the best figures we have been able to obtain.

The East Busways ridership was estimated to be 80,000 on weekdays. It is actually carrying about 30,000. Despite this rather disappointing performance it is being extended 2.3 miles over the opposition of local suburbs who wanted light rail.

The West Busway was estimated to carry 50,000 weekday riders but has so far managed only 7,000. In fairness, this busway may be extended further out, in which case ridership may increase. However, it is still not projected to reach the airport, which might have been the ultimate destination in this area.

Pittsburgh's light rail system is actually the remnants of their old streetcar and interurban system, some of which has now been upgraded to light rail standards. There are approximately 23 miles of light rail lines now in operation. With the exception of one fairly short line that runs primarily on city streets, the majority of the remaining light rail Pittsburgh is over private right-of-way in urban or suburban neighborhoods. This does not mean it is high speed however, because their light rail makes many stops that are close together. However it does appear to do an excellent job of serving the many neighborhoods it passes through and is well patronized.

Pittsburgh's light rail ridership increased about 35 per cent, from 24,000 to 36,000 after the streetcar system was converted to light rail. This happened despite the fact that the transit authority put a premium peak fare on the light rail system. There has more recently been some reduction in the 36,000 figure due in part to the Overbrook line being temporarily out of service and a general decline in transit ridership over the entire system, probably due in part to the economy.

Another measure of the success of light rail is the recent real estate listings in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette. Dozens of listings mention "close to light rail" while very few mention "close to bus line" and none mentioned the busway specifically.

What does this all mean to Charlotte? Looking at the two modes of transit from the standpoint of public acceptance and ridership, it clearly appears that light rail in Pittsburgh has met with much greater success than the busway alternative. The figures seem to speak for themselves. The lessons learned in Pittsburgh should be applied in Charlotte. It is too late in Pittsburgh to change what is already built. It is not too late in Charlotte to learn from their mistakes. (See related article, *Maximize the Usefulness of Transit Corridors* on page 2.)

North Corridor—Why So Slow?

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Railroad (NS) to purchase the tracks from Charlotte to Mooresville. It will be necessary to completely rebuild these tracks in order to operate commuter trains. The NS presently operates only one slow freight train a day over these tracks and therefore has little interest in improving them. If CATS were not to buy the right-of-way, they would be put in the position of having to improve tracks they do not own, and have little, if any, control over. Also there is presently no signaling on this line, which will be needed in the future for commuter trains. Anyone who has done any negotiating with a railroad knows how slow and unpredictable this can be.

Three; There are presently 109 grade crossings on the line. These include many private crossings that only lead to someone’s house. Some of these will be reconfigured to cut down substantially on the total number. The remaining crossings will be much better protected for trains and cars than is presently the case.

Four: Even if all the above were to happen tomorrow, there would still be no suitable station for an Uptown terminal for these trains. The present station on North Tryon is too far from the center of town to be useful to commuters. A new Multi-modal Transportation Center to be located on West Trade Street will be much better located, however it is unfortunately at least 6 or 7 years away from completion. Also, all the other

stations along the line must still be built, along with all their necessary support facilities (parking lots, bus transfer bays, etc).

Five: On top of all this a new or rebuilt connection to the planned new Uptown terminal must be built, probably utilizing the unused track that roughly parallels Graham Street. Use of the present connection that heads uptown at Atando Junction would put commuter trains out on the NS mainline, to which NS would likely object.

If all of the above procedures are followed, you can begin to see why it may take five or six years before trains are running. Possibly some short cuts can be taken to get us through this maze a little faster. Maybe the north corridor could be opened in stages, while the balance is still under construction. Maybe a temporary commuter station could be opened Uptown, while the Multi-modal Transportation Center is still being finished. Maybe there are others out there with ideas about how we can make this happened sooner, rather than later.

One thing the north corridor has in its favor. They have always known what they wanted and where they wanted it built. Many other corridors don’t even know that! If Lake Norman communities and their citizens continue to be solidly behind a clearly defined project, as they have in the past, there must be a way to cut some time out of this project and see it through to completion.

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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