

MINUTES  
METROPOLITAN TRANSIT AUTHORITY  
BOARD OF DIRECTORS  
REGULAR BOARD MEETING  
DECEMBER 21, 2006

The regularly scheduled monthly meeting of the Metropolitan Transit Authority Board of Directors was called to order at 10:12 a.m. by Chairman David S. Wolff. Vice Chairman Gerald Smith, Board Secretary Jackie Freeman, and Board Members George DeMontrond, III, Rafael Ortega, Louise Richman and C. Jim Stewart, III were all present and constituted a quorum. Board Member James W. E. Dixon, II arrived at 10:14 a.m. Board Member Carmen Orta arrived at 10:21 a.m.

Chairman Wolff first called for approval of the Minutes of the Regular Board Meeting of November 16, 2006. Board Member Rafael Ortega moved approval of the Minutes, as written. Board Member Stewart seconded the Motion and all Board Members present voted their approval. (Board Member Dixon and Board Member Orta were not present for the vote on this matter.)

MOTION NO. 2006 – 56

Chairman Wolff next called for the President & Chief Executive Officer's Business Report.

President & Chief Executive Officer Frank Wilson began his report with the announcement of the retirement of Francis Britton, METRO's Chief Financial Officer. Mr. Wilson praised Mr. Britton's hard work, dedication and intellect. He described Mr. Britton as "the quintessential yes-man" for his ability to get things done.

Chairman Wolff then announced that Board Member Louise Richman would soon resign from the METRO Board to assume the position of METRO's new Chief Financial Officer. Chairman Wolff summarized the talent and expertise that Board Member Richman will bring to the job. He noted that the Board will, unfortunately, lose a wonderful member who has worked tirelessly to represent the interests of the multi-cities.

Mr. Wilson concluded his report with the introduction of Helen Cavazos as METRO's new Vice President of Human Resources.

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Chairman Wolff stated that he would change the usual order of agenda items. At the suggestion of City of Houston Council Member Pam Holm, the public comments portion of the meeting would be held after the University Line presentation. Therefore, persons wishing to comment on the University Line can better respond to the status of the project. He then called upon Bryan Pennington, Vice President of Planning, Engineering & Construction, for the presentation of University Line alternatives.

Mr. Pennington stated that staff, with its consultants, have reviewed over 50 alternative alignments. He then introduced Steve Beard, of S. R. Beard & Associates, for a discussion of the review process. Mr. Beard explained that METRO is seeking federal funds for development of the University Corridor and, therefore, must meet certain federal requirements. METRO must prepare an Environmental Impact Statement for approval by the Federal Transit Administration ("FTA"). Mr. Beard explained the steps undertaken for preparation of the Environmental Impact Statement. The first step was the "scoping process," conducted in June, July and August, to obtain community input. He stated how the next step comprises the adoption of a short list of alternatives. METRO will then coordinate with the FTA for further evaluations and preparation of the Environmental Impact Statement. Following a public hearing, the Board will determine a single locally preferred alternative. Mr. Beard stated that the Board will be asked, today, to approve a short list of alternatives.

Mr. Beard then explained how the initial 50 – plus alternatives were reduced to develop a "short list." The alternatives were evaluated under several factors, such as conceptual engineering, cost estimating, ridership, and traffic impacts. METRO must also comply with the FTA "New Starts" process. The "New Starts" evaluation process will occur on a single, locally preferred alternative. This process requires the assessment of an acceptable financial rating and project justification. Mr. Beard stated that the FTA must determine the project's cost effectiveness in order to recommend federal funding. In its review of the University Line alternatives, Mr. Beard explained how METRO evaluated the alternatives, internally, to identify those alignments most likely to obtain federal approval. Based on these evaluations, three alternatives west of Main Street were identified to be carried forward into the federal submissions. He then presented three alternatives for the eastern segment of the alignment. Mr. Beard explained that with the Board's decision of a short list of alternatives, METRO can proceed with further evaluation leading to preparation of the Environmental Impact Statement. This document will be circulated, a public hearing will be held and more public meetings will occur. The process will

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culminate in the preparation of a Final Environmental Impact Statement. It is anticipated that METRO can begin project construction by 2008.

Vice Chairman Smith asked about service to Jack Yates High School. Mr. Beard answered that the high school will be evaluated the same as the area universities, with emphasis on current transit use and projected use. The computer models forecast expanded growth in university campus development.

Chairman Wolff informed the public of METRO's commitment that construction proceed so as to minimize neighborhood impacts. There must be compliance with METRO's Small Business and Disadvantaged Business Enterprise Program. Chairman Wolff explained that the Board is also committed to action. Despite years of discussions about transit improvements, there have been few results. We are about 20 years behind, and we are paying the price in poor air quality, congestion and hampered mobility. Construction should begin this summer on the North, Southeast and East End Corridors.

Chairman Wolff then moved approval of the short list of alternatives for University Corridor development. Board Member George DeMontrond seconded the Motion.

MOTION NO. 2006 – 57

Chairman Wolff then invited members of the public to share their views with the Board. The persons who spoke and the substance of their comments were as follows:

1. Mr. Bill Crow – from the staff of U. S. Congressman John Culberson; expressed his appreciation for the inclusion of suggested alignment alternatives which take into consideration the people and businesses along Richmond. He suggested that METRO's experiences regarding the Main Street line should provide guidance for METRO's development of the University Corridor.

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2. City of Houston Council Member Pam Holm – thanked Chairman Wolff for permitting public comments after the presentation. Council Member Holm stated that the process for selection of the short list has been comprehensive and reflective of the inclusion of community input. She recommended continued reference to the June 7 letter that she submitted, along with Council Members Ada Edwards and Ann Clutterbuck, as guidance for minimizing construction impacts. She further recommended that all parties continue to work together to bring the project to a successful conclusion.

Chairman Wolff encouraged their continued involvement and emphasized METRO's commitment to openness and transparency.

3. City of Houston Council Member Peter Brown – noted the complexity of the planning process that must occur so that the City may have a world class transit system. He recommended a standing "Urban Design Review" Committee to enable ongoing community involvement.

4. City of Houston Council Member Ada Edwards – thanked the Board for including the community in the process, and especially the involvement of the District D Task Force.

5. Trisha Kiel – of richmondrail.org, and chairman of the Richmond Revitalization Group, offered the assistance of her organization in support of the construction of light rail in the Richmond area.

6. Chris Seger – suggested more consideration for the businesses, residents and surrounding landscape that will be impacted by the construction. He expressed support for Alternative 3.

Chairman Wolff reminded the speaker of his involvement with Trees of Houston and service as chairman of the Houston Parks Board. A great deal of attention has been given to neighborhood aesthetics and METRO will continue to address those issues.

7. Paul Magaziner – stated his goal that all rail construction be stopped and that the METRO Board be composed of members chosen by election. Mr. Magaziner voiced his support for commuter rail. He stated that taxpayer funds have been wasted, and that "rail" spelled backwards is "liar."

8. Mark Ulrich – Vice President of the St. George Place Civic Association, explained that a neighborhood vote was divided on its support of University Corridor development. He prefers that rail not be constructed on Richmond. He is concerned about traffic impacts, noise and aesthetics.

9. Kristin Lundquist – prefers that the University Line alignment avoid the homes on the north side of Childress.

Chairman Wolff explained how her suggested route would require construction near high voltage power lines and near a major rail line. It would also be necessary to relocate a drainage easement. Therefore, construction costs would be significantly higher. Chairman Wolff explained that the alignment alternatives were reviewed very carefully under several factors, including constructability.

10. Jane Page – of Crescent Real Estate, voiced support for a rail line to serve the Greenway Plaza area. She thanked METRO staff members for their willingness to provide information about transit plans.

11. Daphne Scarbrough – voiced concern that rail along Richmond will destroy her business, and take property on which trees and historical buildings are now located. Ms. Scarbrough stated that the proposals do not include Westpark in its entirety, and she disagreed that construction along Richmond could proceed in segments. She stated that construction will also impact the existing waterline.

President & Chief Executive Officer Frank Wilson responded that four independent engineering firms have determined that construction will not damage or impair the water line's capacity. Any necessary water line repairs can be coordinated through the Public Works Department.

12. LaShone Jackson – President of the Wheeler Place Homeowners Association, expressed support for METRO. He stated that he previously lived in Washington, D. C., and in San Francisco, and he knows how transit can benefit an area.

Chairman Wolff added that younger people who have lived in cities served by transit appreciate its importance. Transit, for the Houston area, has almost become a “generational debate.”

13. U. S. Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee – thanked the Board for its hard work toward transit development. She thanked the METRO staff for working with her staff and with the community, and thanked the input of local elected officials. Congresswoman Lee stated that referendums provide a framework, and that the Board's vote is not a singular vote for a particular line. There is an opportunity to work with congressional colleagues in a new Congress that is supportive of METRO's efforts toward regional mobility. She invited the Board to a town hall meeting and asked that the Board continue to focus on "full comprehensive transparent community involvement." Congresswoman Lee stated that she had sent a letter to the Federal Transit Administration encouraging action on the full funding grant agreement. She urged that we view rail as an "economic arm of empowerment." The project can create jobs and revitalize the community. She offered her continuing assistance in the development of regional mobility and rail.

Congresswoman Lee asked if there will be a process of community hearings after the Board's vote.

Chairman Wolff answered affirmatively.

Congresswoman Lee extended an invitation to a meeting on the east side to discuss regional mobility and economic opportunities.

14. Robert McClain – supports the third alternative presented for inclusion on the "short list." He believes that rail on Richmond will impair mobility. He asked if the University Line is a single alignment or if it is actually two distinct lines, i.e. an east and west alignment, with distinct criteria, ridership profiles and objectives.

Chairman Wolff answered that the University Line is "one line."

15. Carl Mensch – President of Wesleyan 12 Civic Association, believes that the Main Street line is a failure and that the goal of the University Line is to serve the Galleria.

Chairman Wolff stated that Mr. Mensch's comments contain misstatements of fact. The Main Street Line carries 40,000 to 50,000 people per day and is a tremendous success.

Mr. Mensch questioned staff estimates and whether the use of the City right-of-way is considered a “taking.” He also suggested that rail be constructed in “depressed areas” if it has economic benefits.

Chairman Wolff noted the difference between an easement and the right-of-way. Property owners do not own the adjacent City right-of-way. Chairman Wolff added that the METRO Solutions plan covers all areas of the City and will provide service where needed. He suggested that Mr. Mensch obtain more reliable information, so that his issues can be adequately addressed.

16. Christoff Spieler – of the Citizens Transportation Coalition, looks forward to continuing discussions of transit options and neighborhood impacts.

17. Tom Chappell – Chairman of the Community Relations Committee for Greenway Plaza Condominiums, stated that residents are evenly divided on the University Line alignments. He expressed a desire to work with METRO to minimize traffic impacts.

18. Ted Richardson – supports the third University Line alternative which includes an elevated component near the Southwest Freeway. He is disappointed however, that the process did not include an alignment on the south side of Highway 59, Wheeler Station to the Montrose area.

Chairman Wolff stated that METRO carefully considered several of Mr. Richardson’s suggestions. He further explained the impact of periodic bus stops within a moving lane of traffic. Rail can carry more passengers and enhances overall mobility.

Mr. Richardson asked about shared lanes.

Mr. Frank Wilson responded that the general order of design priority is to avoid shared left-turn lanes.

19. Jonathan Paul – of richmondrail.org, voiced his support of rail on Richmond Avenue. He explained that traffic problems cannot be solved by building more roads. “It’s like trying to loosen your belt to solve obesity.” He stated his commitment to creating a vibrant livable Houston, and rail should be constructed where the people are located.

There being no other public comments regarding the University Corridor, Chairman Wolff repeated his Motion to approve a short list of alternatives for the University Corridor, which had been previously seconded. He then called for a vote, and all Board Members gave their unanimous approval of the short list.

RESOLUTION NO. 2006 – 82

The meeting recessed for a short break at 11:55 a.m. The meeting reconvened at 12:15 p.m. to hear comments from the remaining persons who had requested to speak before the Board and to conduct further business.

The remaining persons who requested to speak before the Board and the substance of their comments were as follows:

20. Dominick Mazoc – uses transit for leisure and entertainment trips in addition to work trips. Transit enables him to avoid excessive parking fees and traffic congestion. He thanked Chief Lambert for the extra security near the transit stations.

21. Joseph Charles – requested the return of a paratransit disability card and certain stolen property.

22. Tom Bazan – expressed concern that stray electrical current has been leaking from the Main Street METRORail line and contributing to the corrosion of underground infrastructure.

President & Chief Executive Officer Frank Wilson reminded Mr. Bazan that he (Mr. Wilson) reported this issue 2 years ago and corrective measures have been undertaken. Every rail line will produce some stray current. However, any stray current from the existing METRORail line is insignificant. If problems occur, METRO will take the necessary action to ensure system safety.

23. James Varner – a student at the University of Houston Downtown campus, explained how his transit expenses will now increase to \$350.00 to use the Park & Ride. The UPass gave him unlimited transit access for only \$22.00 per semester. Mr. Varner believes a flat UPass rate is preferable to a discount. He suggested a rate of \$220.00.



Mr. Wilson stated that a flat rate was considered. However, some students use transit infrequently while others may use it daily. Those who use transit less frequently might find a higher flat rate for the UPass financially burdensome. He explained the ongoing task of balancing the need for a realistic fare system with the needs of patrons with varying needs and future transit users. Mr. Wilson added that those students using the UPass today will be “grandfathered” so as to avoid disruptions during the school year.

Board Member Dixon stated that the change in the fare structure presents complex challenges to students and METRO must work to minimize those challenges.

24. Judy Moud – of Bridget’s Hope, a women’s shelter and halfway house, stated that most residents use the bus as their primary mode of transportation. The fare restructure will significantly increase transit costs. She asserted that the burdens of the increases are unfairly falling on the poor.

25. Bobby Dees – complained that the Gessner Road reconstruction project included the widening of a drainage ditch. A crossing that he previously used has now been removed. He requested its replacement. Mr. Dees is also concerned that other drainage improvements might cause the runoff of hazardous materials onto his property.

Bryan Pennington, METRO’s Vice President of Planning, Engineering & Construction, explained that the drainage improvements are to be constructed on behalf of the Harris County Flood Control District. There is no legal requirement for replacement of the crossing.

Upon questioning from Chairman Wolff, Mr. Dees acknowledged that he could pay the costs for replacement of the crossing, but he feels it should be “grandfathered” into the project. Mr. Dees stated that the crossing was on the property when it was purchased some 20 years ago.

Mr. Wilson added that METRO will contact the City of Houston and the Harris County Flood Control District in hopes of finding a solution.

26. Richard Freeman – stated that he suffers from a number of physical ailments. He has not received the retirement benefits to which he believes he is entitled.

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At the conclusion of the public comment portion of the meeting, and there being no other matters to come before the Board for consideration, the meeting adjourned at 12:55 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

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Paula J. Alexander  
Assistant Secretary