

CENTRAL TEXAS *MUST TAKE A REGIONAL VIEW OF TRANSIT*

John D. Cowman, Mayor of Leander

Everyone seems to talk about Central Texas' transportation issues. In downtown Austin, many solutions have been offered: trolley cars, parking garages, rubber tires and/or steel wheels and the like. We treat traffic congestion like the weather; we act as if we have no control over it. I offer the following approach to solve our regional transportation issues.

I do not know if it's best to dedicate lanes, time traffic lights, go with steel wheels or rubber-tires or implement some combination of the aforementioned. But I do know for sure that the traffic problem downtown is not solely Austin's problem. Downtown Austin's traffic problem is the region's traffic problem.

Many Central Texans come into downtown Austin to work and play. You can see this daily migration on the southbound lanes of MoPac Boulevard (Loop 1) and the northbound lanes of Interstate 35. Downtown is where we all seem to end up; Austin is the hub for the region.

Capital Metro's MetroRail is set to begin operation from Leander to downtown Austin on March 30, 2009. This will be a great day for Leander and Austin as well as the region, as I am sure the system will be enjoyed by eager commuters finally getting an alternative to their daily grind of driving and fighting traffic. When commuters disembark in Austin, they will reach their final destinations on foot, by bike, by Dillo or other local bus, or by a specially-designated circulator bus that will be ready and waiting for train passengers. It's a great interim solution and will work on a temporary basis, but these commuters will be hungry for better access, for a system that connects them to all places they need and want to go — for a system that links our region.

What we need is a regional transit system, one that connects all areas of our region; one that uses the right system for the connections, whether commuter rail, light rail, ultra light rail, streetcars, trolleys, express buses, bus rapid transit or local bus.

We need to come together as regional partners and fix the regional problem that affects all of us. The University of Texas, Austin Community College and cities in Williamson, Hays, Travis, Bastrop and Caldwell counties should come together to call a "regional referendum" for our 25-year transportation needs. We need leaders who are willing to make the best decisions for the whole region. I am challenging all entities in the five-county area to help develop a long-term transportation plan. We need leaders and professionals to step up. Now.

First, we need a regional bond program to create and maintain a downtown Austin transit system. Second, we could use existing rail lines to add commuter rail from Elgin/Manor to Austin. Third, we could use the Mogan right-of way to build a commuter link between Georgetown/Round Rock and Austin. Finally, we need a link from downtown to Austin-Bergstrom International Airport. We also need to be planning the Buda/Kyle corridor as well as Oak Hill and beyond, connecting ultimately with San Marcos, New Braunfels and San Antonio.

As mayor of Leander, I recognize that a regional problem affects us all. No matter where the problem is, I am willing to invest my share in helping Georgetown, Oak Hill or Elgin just as long as I know that we are working together as a region to solve our problems. I am willing to step up. I am challenging all city councils, boards of regents, commissions, neighborhood groups and the like to push in the same direction.

Remember, a region divided cannot stand.