

COMMENT

GUEST COLUMN

MATA supports Downtown-Airport light rail

Memphis and its suburbs will prosper or stagnate according to how thoroughly we address our transportation needs, says **WILLIAM HUDSON**.

MEMPHIS IS AT A CROSSROADS in long-range planning for its transportation needs. At the Memphis Area Transit Authority, we are pleased to join others in giving fair and complete consideration to light rail as an option.

Many cities that we compete with have recently launched new light rail systems or expanded existing ones. The time is right for the Memphis metro community to begin exploring our potential to build the right infrastructure for long-term needs.

The issues are numerous: fiscal responsibility, corridor priority, peer city competitiveness, potential usage and spin-off development. Before they can be discussed with integrity, however, a few misconceptions that have clouded past discussions must be cleared up.

■ First, we are talking about light rail, not a historic trolley. Modern light rail vehicles, such as those operating in St. Louis, Dallas, Baltimore, Salt Lake City and many other cities, would be used. Vintage trolley cars belong only where they are today, on short-hop Downtown lines.

■ Second, what purpose would a Downtown-Airport line serve? As the first light rail line to serve Memphis, a Downtown-Airport line would



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offer an attractive, high-capacity alternative to the automobile in an area with the most important attributes to ensure success. These attributes include: high concentrations of employment, such as the airport, FedEx and Kellogg's on one end of the route and Downtown and the medical center on the other; moderate- and high-density neighborhoods and commercial centers along and near the corridor, and growing traffic congestion on nearby Interstate 240.

The primary purpose of a Downtown-Airport line would not be to carry air travelers between the airport and Downtown. Rather, it would carry Memphians to many destinations in the corridor for all kinds of purposes: work, medical appointments, school, sporting events, etc. Stations would be

strategically located along the route to provide the greatest accessibility.

■ Third, how would access to light rail ensure the system is a traffic solution, not a part of the problem? For many cities, abandoned freight lines have been readily accessible to commuter transit needs. St. Louis' transit authority was able to build its first light rail line — connecting the airport and downtown — by using almost

exclusively abandoned railroad property.

Unfortunately, freight railroad rights-of-way are very difficult to acquire in Memphis. "America's Distribution Center" is served by several Class 1 railroad companies that own the rails, and usually the property they are on as well. To our economy's benefit, most of them are heavily used.

There are other ways to create space for light rail to operate at speeds that make it an attractive alternative to the automobile. Individual properties can be purchased to create an exclusive right-of-way — essentially allowing the same type of operation that would be possible in a freight railroad right-of-way.

MATA is proposing this approach for the portion of the Downtown-Airport line that would operate adjacent to Airways and Plough boulevards, where a great deal of vacant property is available. Bridges would be constructed over major roads and railroad tracks.

This is not the case in parts of Midtown where large-scale purchase of property and/or bridge construction would have an unacceptable impact on the very businesses and residents the line would serve. In those areas, operation in the street is the only alternative. City after city has demonstrated that light rail and automobile traffic can coexist to mutual benefit. In almost all cases, automobiles and light rail cars are in separate lanes and traffic signals are timed to allow rail cars to pass through intersections with minimum delay. In very limited cases, rail cars share lanes with automobiles.

Modern light rail adds value to the neighborhoods and business areas it serves. Evidence from other U.S. cities shows that development follows light rail lines, and that property values are higher around rail stations. And a coordinated effort among business associations, developers and city agencies can ensure that redevelopment happens in areas that need it.

The economic impact study of light rail recently initiated by the Memphis Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) can help inform the public discussion about long-range transportation options for the region. To do so, it must explore not only the benefits and costs of light rail, but also the full impact of continuing on our present path of road-building that contributes to urban sprawl. We can't ignore the hidden costs of growth that urban sprawl creates.

MATA's role is to encourage an active community-wide dialogue and, ultimately, to execute sound plans and projects. I challenge community leaders to step forward to lead an informed discussion.

Progressive communities keep an eye on the present while focusing on the potential that the future holds. All of us, in Memphis and its suburbs, will prosper or stagnate according to how thoroughly we address our transportation needs. With the support of the community, MATA is prepared to help Memphis join our competing cities in making light rail an important part of its future transportation system.