

Natomas News

Monday, January 26, 2009

RT fast-tracks trains to airport

Of-delayed, costly plan for northern light-rail line set for Monday hearing.

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Published: Saturday, Feb. 23, 2008 | Page 3B

After years of delay, transit officials are proposing an aggressive new strategy to connect the city to Sacramento International Airport with light rail, starting next year.

RT officials said they'll do it in bite-sized chunks, starting with a mile-long line from the downtown Amtrak depot, running through the railyard, stopping just short of the American River. Target opening date is 2010.

How long it will take to reach the airport remains anyone's guess, Regional Transit officials admit. Their aim is 2017.

But to get there, the agency must vie with other cities for limited federal transportation grants, and then coax Sacramento voters in the coming years to chip in local money.

RT will fund the first \$37 million segment with expected local transportation sales tax money.

"This is very aggressive," RT interim General Manager Mike Wiley said. "But it's what we need to launch. We'll get back in (the) federal (funding) process when the timing is right."

Money isn't the only issue RT faces in connecting its 37-mile urban rail system to the airport.

The proposed rail line – called DNA, or Downtown-Natomas-Airport – is opposed by some environmentalists who say trains will encourage sprawl on flood-prone farmland near the airport.



Some residents complain about the cost, noting that RT's own analysis indicates the line will only marginally reduce congestion and improve air quality.

Others in Sacramento's burgeoning north area argue the promised line will help avoid traffic problems in the community – and complain it is long overdue.

The RT board of directors holds a hearing Monday on their environmental analysis for what has become the most scrutinized light-rail extension in years.

Total cost for the 13-mile line – including up to 16 stations, river and freeway bridges, parking lots and double-rail track – is estimated at \$785 million.

Construction on the line has been stalled for years as local officials struggled to compete for federal funds. Federal transit officials typically pay for up to half of chosen projects.

RT officials say their new strategy of starting the line with local money should make it easier, later, to attract federal funds.

The line would start from the current light-rail end-point at the downtown train depot, run north through the vacant railyard, and end at Richards Boulevard.

Land around the line is largely vacant, but officials said they want trains up and ready to go when expected redevelopment happens in the railyard and along Richards Boulevard.

A second segment, coming sometime after 2010, would cross the American River and follow Truxel Road past Arco Arena into North Natomas.

There, trains passing every 15 minutes would be commuter workhorses, taking pressure off Interstate 5, which is becoming a troubling bottleneck at the river.

An RT analysis indicates the airport will be one of the busiest station stops with 2,000 daily passengers by 2027 – but it shows the 13-mile ride from downtown will take 43 minutes.

RT forecasts nearly 90 percent of airport users will continue to get there in cars. But officials say the airport connection is an important part of molding a future where travelers have options.

With the DNA line, RT board member Roger Dickinson said, "you've created a real choice."

Downtown resident Anna Elzeftawy takes a bus to the airport, but is eager for light rail. "I would rather take a train. Even if it's 43 minutes, it's reliable."

Some Natomas residents don't see rail as a benefit.

Farrell Wheeler, who sports a "No Light Rail on Truxel" T-shirt, said Truxel Road "was never designed for a railroad to go down the middle." He worries rail could bring transients. "Folks sleeping on benches, it's something I don't want in my neighborhood."

Ken Stevenson, head of the Natomas Community Association transportation committee, said he believes express buses would be cheaper and better.

The rail line, however, by 2027 is expected to handle 14,000 boardings a day, projections show.

An RT analysis says that will reduce car travel in Natomas by about 1 percent.

That's not much for the money, Stevenson argues, especially since trains are expected to cause more congestion on certain streets.

However, transportation analysts with the Sacramento Area Council of Governments say their studies generally show that even small changes can help ease freeway traffic.

RT's Wiley said his agency is redoing its analysis to include new development in the DNA corridor, and he expects it to bump up ridership projections.

He argues that, in the long run, express buses wouldn't handle demand in Natomas and the Richards Boulevard area.

Environmentalist Jude Lamare argued that the proposed line already is inducing suburban sprawl.

With RT's support, city officials recently cited the rail line as a reason to annex farmland near the airport where developer Angelo K. Tsakopoulos and partners plan 3,500 residences, called Greenbriar.

RT officials say Greenbriar will bump up their ridership numbers, helping them compete for federal money.

Tuesday is the deadline for public comment on RT's draft environment report on the project.

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