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Metro hopes rail options get Richmond route foes onboard

One plan would switch the line to Westpark at a point along way

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Attempting to allay fears that its next light rail line would disrupt residences and businesses along Richmond, Metro officials on Tuesday unveiled options they say would preserve the thoroughfare's character.

At the first of three planned public sessions on the University Line, the Metropolitan Transit Authority proposed options including an elevated section through Greenway Plaza and extension of the line to Hillcroft along the Westpark corridor.

Officials also said they would build the line in segments, hoping to avoid the disruption of business and traffic that occurred when it built the seven-mile Main Street line all at once.

The University Line would run on Richmond at least from South Main to Shepherd.

From there, it either could continue west on Richmond to Sage Road and then cross over to Metro right of way south of Westpark, or drop south to Westpark at any of six other crossover points — the most likely being Greenway Plaza.

Wherever the route dropped to Westpark, it would continue west all the way to Metro's Hillcroft Transit Center, where it would link to bus routes serving both affluent and blue-collar neighborhoods in west Houston.

Some of the most adamant opposition to rail on Richmond has come from the Afton Oaks subdivision, which borders Richmond just inside the West Loop. Metro board chairman David Wolff said at a news conference Tuesday that Metro will poll Afton Oaks residents to see how widespread the opposition there is.

"I'm perfectly happy to run this down through Greenway Plaza," he said. "It's really up to the folks in Afton Oaks."

Some of them were among more than 100 people who attended the first of the meetings Metro has scheduled in coming days to discuss the options for the University Line and get comments from residents.

Attendees milled around tables with plans depicting the line, asking questions of Metro officials.

The agency appeared to win few converts.

"I'm absolutely against this," said Beverly Stone, a 27-year resident of Afton Oaks. "It will significantly reduce the value of our homes."

Stone, a member of the Afton Oaks civic organization, said the rail line would be like a knife in the heart of her neighborhood.

John Sedlak, Metro executive vice president, spoke for a few minutes and then fielded questions.

"It's a great turnout," he said. "We are trying to get the public's reaction. We wanted to get the facts out there."

Attendees were given forms to record their comments.

Greenway Plaza option

Wolff said that although he prefers having the line on Richmond from Main Street to Sage, there is merit in crossing to Westpark at Greenway Plaza.

He said officials of the office complex, which has 50,000 employees, would like to have the line pass through it on an elevated track with a Greenway Plaza station.

Putting it there would avoid having boarding platforms in the oak-lined Richmond median.

The Greenway crossover option would require a bridge over the Southwest Freeway, but Wolff said keeping the line on Richmond would require a viaduct over the Union Pacific freight tracks just west of Wesleyan.

Wolff said Metro staff expects to recommend a route by Aug. 8. Metro President and CEO Frank Wilson said Metro hopes to obtain federally required environmental clearance for the line by December 2007, begin construction in June 2008 and have the line operating in December 2012.

Metro hopes the public meeting Tuesday and two next week will soothe fears that Metro will condemn private properties, cut down mature oaks in the Richmond median, reduce traffic capacity, eliminate left turns, and make it hard for businesses to survive during and after construction.

Addressing these points, Wolff said the tracks would run outside the median west of Shepherd, sparing the trees.

The three traffic lanes in each direction in the segment would remain, he said, although they would be narrower.

Wolff said 35 of the 42 existing left-turn locations would also remain, and Metro would construct the line in segments, with a goal of finishing each within 180 days.

He said the agency would have to condemn eight entire properties along the 10-mile route. Metro would take about 80 other strips 8 feet wide or less, he said.

Culberson to wait and see

Afton Oaks resident Chris Seger said, however, that actual losses for homeowners could be greater, since many lawns extend onto easements owned by the city.

Metro spokesman George Smalley said the agency's use of such land would not be considered a taking of private property.

U.S. Rep. John Culberson, R-Houston, whose support is crucial to Metro obtaining federal money for the line, did not express an opinion on the revised plans.

Culberson said Metro officials told him Thursday that "they needed two weeks to make their case to the people on Richmond, and I agreed to wait two weeks before publicly expressing what my position would be.

"Metro does not need to sell this plan to me, but to the people I represent who will be most affected — people whose homes or businesses and properties are on Richmond," he said.

East of Main Street, the University Line would run along Alabama, Wheeler or Elgin to Texas Southern University and the University of Houston.

The ballot in the 2003 referendum in which voters approved what was then called the Westpark Line described it as ending at Hillcroft, but Metro's previous maps of the University Line had shown it stopping just past the West Loop.

With an extension to Hillcroft, a route crossing over at Greenway Plaza would run for about two-thirds of its length on Westpark, Wolff noted.

That could strengthen Metro's argument that it is complying with the referendum if the issue ends up in court.

Afton Oaks Civic Club officials have said they are prepared to sue to force another transit referendum if Metro persists with plans for rail on Richmond, which was not mentioned in the ballot resolution that voters narrowly approved.

Uptown Line option

Wilson said Metro is studying having the University Line's light rail trains switch onto the planned Uptown Line on Post Oak Boulevard, enabling passengers to reach the Galleria shopping area without having to transfer.

Current plans call for the Uptown Line to use trainlike buses on a guideway, but Wilson said light rail might be substituted "if we can afford it."

The new University Line maps show stations at Montrose, Dunlavy, Shepherd, Kirby, Buffalo Speedway or Greenway Plaza, Wesleyan, South Rice and Hillcroft.

Wilson said the stations would be similar to those on the Main Street line but would be spaced wider to avoid restricting turns.

The planned North, East End, Southeast and Uptown lines, each now intended to use guided busways until ridership increases enough to justify light rail, are scheduled to begin construction next July and open in December 2010, he said.

On Thursday, the Metro board will vote to adopt an East End route, which Wolff said is likely to be on Harrisburg.

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