

Post Oak redesign drops rail for bus lane

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Dug Begley



Uptown Houston President John Breeding says the plan Uptown Houston has come up with for transit is "recognition of reality." The \$177.7 million project would use large buses on a dedicated route along Post Oak to deliver train-like service.

Someday soon the fast lane on Post Oak Boulevard won't be for cars and trucks. And despite years of planning to bring light rail to the Uptown area, the fast lane won't be for trains, either.

Unwilling to wait until 2025 or beyond for trains to come to the Galleria area, Uptown Houston is promoting its own plan. It calls for redesigning and widening Post Oak and connecting two bus-only lanes in the center of the

street with transit centers north and south of the bustling - and often traffic-clogged - office, commercial and residential district.

"This is, to me, recognition of reality," said John Breeding, president of Uptown Houston, a development organization. "We must have transit service and we must be able to provide the office workers an alternative to get to work. It is very obvious that Metro is not

going to be able to build light rail out here for, in my estimate, 20 years."

The \$177.5 million project Uptown has presented to city and regional transportation officials centers uses large buses on a dedicated road to deliver train-like service with central stations and boarding platforms, and without the expense of rail lines.

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operates a rapid transit line, but not in its own lanes - bus rapid transit has been successful in other areas. Cleveland's Health Line, which uses dedicated lanes and city streets, and a similar system in Los Angeles reached ridership estimates ahead of schedule.

Route along Post Oak

Metro shelved plans in 2007 for a number of bus rapid transit lines in favor of building light rail. Those lines were scheduled to be open by now, but funding challenges and a hiccup regarding the requirements to receive federal money delayed work.

"You can always look backwards, but all we can control is to look forward,

and right now things are looking up," said Metro board chairman Gilbert Garcia.

The Uptown buses would run on their own lanes from The Westpark Transit Center planned near U.S. 59, along the freeway to Post Oak Boulevard. The buses would move up the center of Post Oak, separated from traffic by a grass berm, then shift back into their own lanes along Interstate 610, terminating at the Northwest Transit Center north of Interstate 10.

Richard Schmeling, 60, of Katy, said he'd hop on board now if he could.

"I've been waiting for them to do something," said Schmeling, an accountant

with an office on San Felipe.

Connecting to the transit centers is crucial because most workers in the Uptown area commute from southwest and northwest of I-610. But although Metro operates 300 park- and-ride buses daily, only 10 of those buses serve Uptown, Breeding said.

Metro officials realize improvements are needed, Garcia said. That's why they back Uptown's plan.

"There are transit needs everywhere. We know all about them. But Metro's resources are finite," Garcia said. "If we can solve the transit needs in this region without stretching Metro resources, like this does, that is great."

Design is important

Uptown Houston, which derives most of its funding from the tax increment reinvestment zone funded by property taxes in the zone, will pay between \$82.5 million and \$91.6

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million, Breeding said. The rest would come from \$24 million in state transportation funds, and a \$45 million grant from the Houston-Galveston Area Council, using federal money the region received.

Garcia said Metro, which approved the idea in September, will continue to support Uptown as it waits for a decision by H-GAC, expected in about 30 days.

If progress goes as expected, Breeding said, buses could start running in 2017.

It's crucial that the design of the system is appropriate for Post Oak, he said, which prides itself on its character.

"We're the guys who put arches across the street," he said. "We're the guys who put giant granite balls from China at the entrances."

And the bus system has to fit without taking away a driving lane.

Uptown's plans enable Metro to adjust its own priorities, Garcia said. After years focused on building the three rail lines set to open next year, Garcia said, the agency can be more nimble at fixing gaps in service.

The flexibility is built into the Post Oak plans, where trains could one day replace the buses. But in the interim, Garcia said, if buses do the job perhaps Metro can use its resources elsewhere.

That includes the long-discussed east-west University Line. After the East, North and Southeast lines open, and Uptown gets its bus lanes, the University Line remains the one major unfinished light rail line.

It also lies between the downtown rail expansion and the Uptown progress.

"The natural (thing) will be that people will start wondering how we connect the two," Garcia said.