

HOUSTON★CHRONICLE
TRANSPORTATION

Bogged-down Uptown bus plan proceeding

February 10, 2015

Dug Begley



Crippling traffic on Post Oak prompted officials to plan for dedicated bus lanes along the road, connecting transit centers north and south of the Uptown area.

After some uncertainty, fears about rail development in Uptown appear less likely to delay a planned express bus project along Post Oak.

Metropolitan Transit Authority's board meets Thursday morning, and is scheduled to discuss progress on the Uptown plan. The addition to their regularly scheduled meeting comes after a letter last week from Texas Transportation Commissioner Jeff Moseley.

Letter lays out path

The letter lays out a path for officials to settle their differences and keep the \$192.5 million project on track.

Uptown Management District, Metro and the Texas Department of Transportation are all involved in the plan to add center lanes solely for buses to Post Oak, then use dedicated lanes along Loop 610.

The express buses would connect a future Bellaire

Transit Center with the Northwest Transit Center near Interstate 10 and Loop 610, stopping at dedicated platforms along Post Oak.

"If this is successful, and I believe this will be successful, it is going to change things and things people think about transit," said Metro board chairman Gilbert Garcia.

Change also played a role in some of the squabbles. Though supportive of an express bus project, state transportation officials last year stressed they didn't

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want to wade into the debate regarding light rail along Post Oak. Approving \$25 million for the elevated lanes along Loop 610, Moseley stressed this was a bus project.

To ensure that, state transportation officials asked Metro to verify in writing that the project was not a precursor to rail.

Metro worried that a stronger promise would put them in conflict with the voter-approved 2003 referendum, in which Metro laid out plans for light rail on Post Oak. Transit officials ultimately acquiesced to the letter, but also sought via Harris County Attorney Vince Ryan an attorney general's opinion verifying they were not violating the referendum by signing the TxDOT agreement.

Kerfuffle pointless

The pending legal opinion delayed state transportation officials making their final approval of the money. In October, Moseley

indicated if the matter was settled he wanted the money moved elsewhere, before state officials agreed to give Metro until February.

In the interim, the entire kerfuffle became pointless. Last month, federal lawmakers passed the fiscal 2015 spending plan, including language inserted by Rep. John Culberson, R-Houston, that forbids any federal money from going to rail projects along Post Oak north of Richmond, and Richmond west of Shepherd.

"I am keeping my word to my constituents on these two streets who overwhelmingly oppose light rail on Richmond and Post Oak," Culberson said.

The same language was in the previous federal spending bill, enacted Jan. 17, 2014.

In a Jan. 22 letter, Moseley told Garcia that the federal prohibition satisfies TxDOT's concerns.

Without the TxDOT contribution, the elevated lanes along Loop 610 are unlikely, or delayed. Regardless of that, however, Uptown is moving forward with the project, management district officials said.

On Wednesday, Houston City Council members approved the fiscal 2015 budget for Uptown's redevelopment authority. Uptown's oversight is a combination of city approvals for public works funding and projects, and its own board of directors for the management district and tax increment reinvestment zone.

"Democracy sometimes is a slower process than we would like, but we feel things are moving forward," said Uptown president John Breeding.