

Funds for Loop 610 bus lanes remain in state plan

Supporters say project will ease traffic-clogged Uptown area

February 26, 2015

Dug Begley



Uptown is one of Houston's most traffic-clogged areas, but bus lane supporters say better public transit could take cars off the roads and ease waits.

Dedicated bus lanes along Loop 610 remain a part of planned transit service in the Uptown area after state officials kept \$25 million allocated to an upcoming project.

After months of discussions about the project's purpose and agreements between the Metropolitan Transit Authority and the Texas Department of Transportation, state transportation commissioners Thursday approved the state's 10-year spending plan with

the money for the bus lanes included.

John Breeding, president of the Uptown Management District, told officials he was pleased to move the process along.

"We particularly thank you for your leadership and your patience as the area got its act together on this project," Breeding said.

Traffic-clogged

Proponents of the project have noted Uptown is one of Houston's most traffic-clogged areas, a problem

that's likely to worsen with recent development. More frequent, fast and predictable transit, supporters say, could give many workers an option that would take cars off the roads and out of Uptown parking garages.

State transportation officials passed the plan without comment. The plan is updated annually and covers the next decade of road expansion and maintenance as well as transit and alternative transportation projects, such as bicycle lanes.

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For 2015-24, officials plan \$34.45 billion in spending, the vast majority on highways.

The Uptown district is overseeing and building the \$192.5 million project to add bus-only lanes along Post Oak and Loop 610 between a future Bellaire Transit Center and Northwest Transit Center near Interstate 10. The Metropolitan Transit Authority will operate the service, which will feed into its robust park and ride system. City and state money will fund portions of the project.

Though not required for operating express buses along Post Oak, the Loop 610 lanes - which needed state contributions - were considered a vital part of the plan.

Dedicated lanes allow for buses to move more rapidly through the area without sitting in vehicle traffic. The lanes along

Loop 610 give the buses an alternative to clogged frontage roads between Post Oak and the Northwest Transit Center.

"The way this project will be successful is to make it reliable and fast," Metro board chairman Gilbert Garcia said.

Post Oak will continue to have three traffic lanes in each direction, with some turn lanes.

Traffic flow in mind

Some traffic lights will be sequenced to allow buses to avoid stopping but not those at major intersections such as Westheimer and San Felipe, where tweaking the timing could have disastrous effects on traffic flow.

Some adjustments and concessions were required to resolve problems that emerged during planning for the project. TxDOT's demand that Metro stipulate the project was

not a precursor to rail led to squabbling over how far Metro should - or could - go to make this commitment. As transit and state officials bickered, transportation commissioner Jeff Moseley last year suggested moving the money to a suburban highway project.

Breeding said the management district - which typically hasn't led transit projects - juggled many political considerations.

"When you have a very atypical group like us putting together a project, it is unwieldy to get everyone on board," Breeding said.

Garcia said officials now can resolve the few remaining issues, such as design and operations of a new transit center in Bellaire, and get to work.

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"If this project is a success, and I believe it will be a success, I think we've got to be prepared to build upon it," Garcia said.