

Wednesday, October 22, 2003

The Metro Solutions plan to greatly improve transit in the Houston region will come to a vote on November 4. To help increase understanding of the proposal and of transit's place in the greater transportation picture the Gulf Coast Institute will publish a series of educational bulletins.

Facts and factoids*

The Texans for True Mobility television commercial

In honor of responsible debate surrounding the transit referendum, this Houston Transportation Bulletin addresses some statements in the television commercial run by those opposed to the METRO Solutions transit plan.

Statement #1: "Houston can't afford Metro's light rail plan."

Truth: METRO's transit plan is "fiscally constrained" which means that the agency has or will have the financial means to build, operate, and maintain the existing and future transportation network. The federal government prohibits regional governmental agencies from planning and programming transportation projects that do not have revenue sources that can be reasonably expected in the future.

Statement #2: "Even experts say spending billions on light rail won't relieve congestion." The commercial also shows this quote from a "Metro consultant" published in the Houston Chronicle 9/7/03: "Is transit going to reduce congestion? That's going to be real difficult to see."

Truth: The consultant quoted was Steve Beard, of S.R. Beard & Associates. The commercial takes Beard's statement out of context. The full statement is the following: "The region is growing and 20 years from now you're going to have a lot more people and a lot more congestion. It will be less with this transit plan than there would be without it. But is transit going to reduce congestion? That's going to be real difficult to see because transit has to not only keep up with growth but exceed the growth in order to have an impact." Beard said specifically that there will be less congestion with the transit plan than without it. He also spoke of the whole "transit plan," and the narrator's statement is only about light rail. That is, the ad takes something from Beard's statement that he didn't address.

Statement #3: "Dallas tried it. It did not relieve their congestion, and now they've run out of money and have asked taxpayers for an \$18 million bailout." The screen shows newspaper headlines from the Dallas Morning News, one from April 30, about proposed bus cuts, and another from August 5, about DART, the transit agency, seeking \$18 million from the federal government.

Truth: The Texas Transportation Institute (TTI) Urban Mobility Study found that Dallas's transit system relieved congestion by 8 percent in 2001. The study did not measure bus and rail separately. Dallas began operating light rail in 1996. According to the American Public Transportation Association, Dallas's overall transit ridership increased 23 percent from

1997 to 2001. Light rail ridership increased 45 percent over the same time period.** Not only is light rail ridership increasing, but overwhelmingly (77%) approved a near doubling of its rail system in 2000.

To suggest that DART has "run out of money" is simply untrue. Like governmental entities across the nation that are receiving less revenue because of a slower economy, DART's income is lower than expected. DART is now altering its budget and operations, as are other agencies across the nation, but it is not going bankrupt. The \$18 million "bailout" referred to is a federal transit operations maintenance grant DART applied for. DART, like other transit agencies, applies for such funds on a regular basis. This grant would help fund routine maintenance on some trains, buses, and other vehicles. Federal transit grants are not bailouts, but rather mechanisms to distribute federal revenue every year.

Statement #5: "Metro wants to spend \$8 billion on light rail but move less than one percent of our traffic and no congestion relief." The commercial also showed "\$2 billion 22 miles" then "\$8 billion 73 miles."

Truth: Metro will ask voters to approve only the first 10 years of financing for the transit plan, which is less than \$2 billion for rail, with no new taxes. After voters have had a chance to use the rail system, METRO will, as early as 2009, ask voters to approve financing for more rail.

The one-percent assertion includes population outside the METRO service area. In areas that offer transit, at times when the transportation system is in greatest need of relief (morning trip to work), Metro percentages are significantly higher, including a 42 percent market-share to downtown (49 percent projected for 2025) and 31 percent marketshare to the Medical Center (38 percent in 2025).

The "no congestion relief" statement is a clear falsehood. If Houston didn't have public transportation today, our travel time index would worsen by 15 percent, according to the TTI mobility study.

Statement #6: "Metro's plan costs far too much and does far too little."

Truth: Metro's total plan for buses, rail, and roads will cost \$8.5 billion for the next 10 years, or the time period over which voters will approve financing. About 63 percent of the capital expenditures and 93 percent of the operating expenditures are not for rail, but for buses and roads. The total rail cost is less than \$2 billion. The assertion that the plan does far too little is subjective. As mentioned above, the TTI study quantified Metro's congestion time savings. The study also quantified Metro's congestion cost savings finding that the amount Metro saves the region in time and fuel more than exceeds Metro's entire operating costs.

The proposed system will not only relieve congestion, but offer a way to avoid congestion altogether.

*Factoid: something resembling a fact; unverified (often invented) information that is given credibility because it appeared in print. **Unlinked trips