

Citizens For Efficient Mass Transit



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Full Funding Signing Ceremony for South Corridor

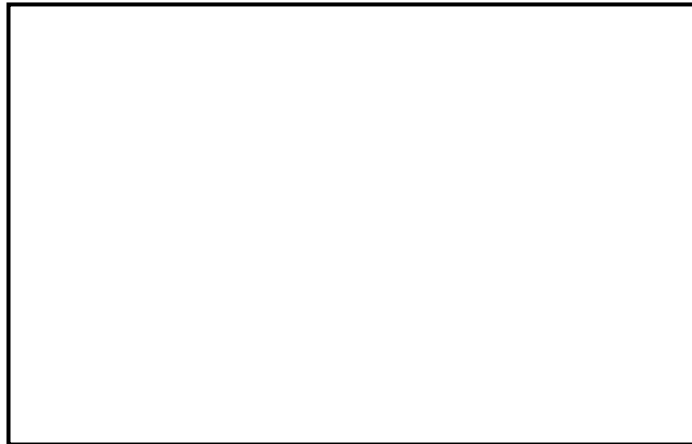
Despite the bright sunshine, the morning of Friday, May 6, 2005 was cold and windy. But that did not dampen the celebration that was about to take place. The signing of the full funding grant agreement for the south Corridor light rail project took place at the barricaded rail crossing of Tremont Ave. The reviewing stand was set up in a tent directly over the future light rail tracks, facing a specially built segment of track, alongside which were positioned ceremonial golden spikes and hammers.

Under the tent on the reviewing stand were public officials and speakers for the event. The introductory speech was delivered by Mayor Patrick McCrory, who was followed by NC Senator Elizabeth Dole, N.C. Representative Mel Watt, Federal Transit Administrator Jennifer Dorn, and CATS CEO Ron Tober. After the speeches, the dignitaries hammered away at the golden spikes, signifying the driving of the first light rail spike for the project.

The event actually celebrated the agreement whereby CATS will receive the full amount of the agreed upon federal grant of \$193 million dollars. This represents 47% of the total cost of the South Corridor light rail project. The federal government would in the best case scenario have contributed 50% of the cost, however the project's budget escalated from \$387 million to \$427 million, primarily due to the addition of several highway overpasses, and the increased cost of steel and

concrete. The FTA refused to pay for these new higher construction costs thereby arriving at the 47% figure. The balance of the cost will be split equally between state and local government.

A crowd of approximately 100 enthusiastic onlookers attended the event, which was also well covered by local media. After the ceremony refreshments were served at the Atherton Mill trolley barn. If everything goes according to plan South Corridor light rail trains may start running in March of 2007.



Driving the first spikes, from left to right, Mayor Pat McCrory, Commissioner Parks Helms, Susan Burgess, and Nancy Carter of the city council.

Uptown's Great! What about our Neighborhoods?

Charlotte's leaders have done a great job of pouring resources into Uptown. We built the beautiful Blumenthal Performing Arts Center and a new convention center. Now we are building

a new arena and a children's learning center, all within a few feet of the future South Corridor Light Rail line. There is talk about moving the Mint Museum uptown. Even the Charlotte Knights may eventually move back from South Carolina to a new home in or near uptown. Certainly this is good transit oriented development.

However it seems to us in our push to revitalize the uptown area we may be neglecting the outlying neighborhoods. It has often been said a city can not survive without a strong city center. We think this is very true, but the reverse is also true. A city center can not remain strong without good, healthy neighborhoods to nourish and support it.

The Independence Blvd. corridor is a prime example of what we are talking about. As one retail establishment after another closes the entire street down to Albemarle Rd. is taking on the aura of abandonment. There are many nice neighborhoods behind the vacant retail strips, but you would never know it by

(Continued on Page 3)

North Corridor Alignment Studied

A study is underway to look at a new alignment for the North Corridor which would in effect straighten a sharp curve and shorten the over-all length of the line by 2/10ths of a mile. The area under study is from a little north of Eastfield Road to a point north of Hambright Road Extended in Huntersville.

The current alignment is said to prevent development because it runs alongside Old Statesville Road (NC 115). It also runs directly by 3 busy public schools which could cause safety issues. The area surrounding the relocated R-O-W is mainly owned by one developer. He has proposed a development to be called "New Hambright Village", which would take advantage of a proposed new station at an extended Hambright Rd. to build a transit oriented development community.

Ultra-Right Appear Lost in the 1950's

The John Locke Foundation, an ultra-right wing think tank organization, is expanding its coverage from its Raleigh roots to Charlotte. With it comes their thinking on mass transit. Here is a sample: "The mass-transit crowd says a technology of the 1800' s—railroads—can solve the traffic congestion of the 21st century." They seem to forget that their favorite mode of transportation, the automobile, is also an invention of the 1800' s. If we are going to throw out every old technology, how about the wheel? It was invented before Christ, but still manages to come in handy now and then.

As much as they would like to paint mass transit, and particularly rail advocates, as living in the past, it is they who actually dwell there. They seem to want to live in a time warp somewhere in the 1950's or 1960's when gas was cheap, the roads were open and there was little thought about the environment or the future of our urban areas. That was then but this is now! As many millions of dollars as people like the John Locke Foundation pour into their efforts to turn back the clock they can not succeed. If we were to follow their advice we would only find ourselves in far worse traffic and air quality problems than we now face, and would soon bump up against the stone wall of reality.

Even an intelligent high school student, if given the facts, could probably determine that we can never build ourselves out of congestion in urban areas with highways alone. Los Angeles started building freeways in 1940. Only World War II stopped their effort to build their way out of congestion. However the fact remains it didn't work then, its not working now, and you have to be somewhat less than realistic to imagine how it will work in the future. When you've tried for 65 years to make the round peg work in the square hole it's time to try the square peg.

Los Angeles was smart enough to finally realize that and they now have light rail, heavy rail, commuter rail and an expanded bus system. Despite what the critics would like you to believe, it is heavily used. It has not, and will not, eliminate congestion. Is it therefore a failure? Ask the hundreds of thousands who ride it daily? It's giving them a choice and at the same time giving people who want to remain with their cars more room on the freeways.

There were many good things about the 50's and 60's --less crime, a simpler way of life, drive-in movies, and malt shops. Even us "transit advocates" can appreciate those things. Who can blame the John Locke people for wanting to turn back the clock! However there were also many bad things happening that most people never think about. For example the Pacific Electric, a major mass transit carrier in the Los Angeles area,

was abandoning hundreds of miles of track that could have been used as the foundation for a modern transit system. Fortunately one line was saved and is now the heavily patronized Los Angeles to Long Beach Blue Line light rail. Also at this time the urban fabric of America's cities and towns was being cut apart by freeways and our urban neighborhoods abandoned in favor of urban sprawl. So not everything about the "good old days" was necessarily good, and not everything about the "bad old days" we live in now is necessarily bad. Many of us have returned to urban living, and it is likely many more will chose to do so in the future. However nobody is being forced to live anywhere they don't want, as some reactionary critics would like to make you believe. A lot of people are beginning to see the wisdom of the transit oriented development we used to have, before there was even a name for it. The best thing about the age in which we now live is that we are able to choose the lifestyle that suits us best. We can live in an exciting and diverse city or live on a couple of acres in the countryside, although we now have to drive further out to find it. Wherever we go we are likely to find modern mass transit an increasingly important part of our lives in the future.

When is a garage not a garage?

Answer: When it is a light rail maintenance facility. The reason we bring up this subject is because we have seen the term "garage" used frequently in the press in connection with light rail. We are sure when we object to the term garage to describe the place where you store trains the critics of light rail will immediately say that it only confirms what they have been saying about light rail advocates being elitists. Others will say we are just being picky.

However this simply not the case. The fact is every form of transportation has its own terminology. If we spoke of the place airplanes were stored, we would use the word "hangar", not garage. In the old days of railroading locomotives were stored in

(Continued on Page 4)

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Mass Transit Security Note

The U.S. Federal government has invested just one penny on security for each mass transit passenger, compared with 9.16 per passenger on aviation security, although U.S. mass transit carries 16 times as many passenger as do the airlines.

Source: *The Brooking Institution/US Today, July 8, 2005*

CATS Indicates it Will Study Streetcar Idea in West

We are extremely heartened to hear CATS say that they will study our idea of modern streetcars for the West Corridor. We first proposed this idea when it became clear that the West Corridor would not qualify for federal funding for light rail. Since we felt that the alternative, a busway, would not promote the needed transit oriented development this area badly needs, we looked for other possible solutions that might work.

Having studied and observed the recently opened modern streetcar line in Portland, Oregon we found it could be built for 35 to 40 per cent less than light rail. It is also much easier and faster to install, making it less disruptive to streets such as Wilkinson Boulevard during construction. We felt this might be something that could greatly benefit the West Side neighborhood, while at the same time be something we could build without federal assistance if necessary. However with its lesser cost maybe some federal funding could possibly be obtained.

Even all these advantages still would not have been sufficient to have propelled us to suggest modern streetcar had it not been for CATS announcement that they were proposing modern streetcar for Central Ave. and Beatties Ford Road.

Uptown's Great!

(Continued from Page 1)

driving down desolate Independence. This street has gone from the serious to the critical stage. We have heard developers say you have to have a critical mass in order to make good things happen in a neighborhood. Right now there is a critical mass of bad things happening on Independence, and the emptiness of the place is dragging down the merchants who fight to remain.

Our city officials should not stand by and allow the situation to continue to deteriorate. Without the same kind of determined intervention they used to turn around Uptown there will soon be nothing left of Independence Blvd. As construction proceeds further east on Independence we see no reason to believe the same problems will not migrate down the street.

Residents and businesses on Independence are hoping that the designation of their street as the Southeast Corridor mass transit line will be the major lifeline they need to survive. Studies are now underway to determine if a busway or light rail will be built. As far as the citizens of this corridor are concerned the choice is solidly in favor of light rail. We think their reasoning is correct. It will be an uphill battle to bring back this corridor, even with light rail. If a busway is selected we feel the situation is hopeless.

What is going to be needed to bring back Independence? We think nothing less than a massive redevelopment effort that will take the co-ordination of planners, developers and transit consultants, together with neighborhood public involvement. We think redevelopment now needs to take place *before* rapid

transit is built. Independence can no longer afford the luxury of waiting for rapid transit to be built. However, whatever redevelopment does occur must be carefully planned so that it can be supported by future mass transit lines. North Carolina's new tax-increment financing districts may be useful in this area.

Disinvestment continues to take its toll on the street. The Charlotte Checkers hockey team is the latest to pull up stakes with a planned move next Season to the new Uptown arena, for what it envisions as greener pastures with corporate sponsors and skyboxes. The problem with this is they are leaving behind many of their hard-core hockey fans who don't like their move uptown, and a neighborhood that needs their economic impact now more than ever. In addition to that they are leaving behind an arena that is a perfect fit for their attendance. Without their presence the Cricket Arena, which is already struggling, will find it even more difficult to survive.

In order for the Southeast Corridor and Independence Blvd. to remain a strong and viable area it is going to need the same degree of commitment to it as our civic leaders have shown they had for uptown. We certainly hope that is not asking too much of them. There are more taxpayers and voters in the neighborhoods than there are uptown. The Southeast Corridor has many things going for it. It has traditionally enjoyed the greatest transit ridership of any of the designated corridors. It is the gateway to Matthews and the fast growing western Union County area beyond. Let's not neglect our southeast neighbors, or any other areas of our city that need help! If we do there is absolutely no doubt we will all live to regret it later.

Now it was no longer a question of proposing another new mode of transit for Charlotte. It was simply a case of extending an existing line (or line to be built) to the West Corridor.

Modern streetcars should be an immense help to Wilkinson Boulevard and the surrounding West Side neighborhoods. We are already beginning to see signs of reinvestment on Wilkinson Boulevard, and the streetcar should greatly enhance that development. Citizens at West Corridor transit meetings have indicated their support for the streetcar proposal.

However modern streetcar may not please everyone on the West Side. It will not be a great help to people wanting a fast ride to the airport. We previously suggested an express bus service for them from the uptown transit centers to the airport terminal. These buses could be extra fare, and be specially equipped with luggage racks for airline passengers and crew. In addition there are plans for a transit hub on Wilkinson Boulevard near Little Rock Road. which would feature shuttle bus service directly to the airport terminal. At some point in the future a people mover might replace the shuttle buses for faster service. We think things could be looking up for the West Corridor!

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Mayor McCrory is Right!

Charlotte Mayor Patrick McCrory has been a critic of some abstract artwork proposed for our transit stations, as well as the new arena. He has been quoted in the press as suggesting that we need some "civilians" on the art selection committees. We wholeheartedly agree with his assessment. First of all we need to say that we are confining our remarks to art that is directly related to our transit stations and the immediate surrounding areas, such as parking lots. We feel it would be inappropriate for us to comment on art in general in these pages.

We have previously said (see "Transit art should be meaningful" in Spring 2004 newsletter) that we feel that any artwork in or near our transit stations needs to be art that the average transit rider can understand, relate to and appreciate. We should not be using transit tax dollars simply to provide a platform for allowing artists to "make a statement." There are plenty of other places artists can go to display this type of work, probably the best being an art gallery, where they can get better exposure to and from the arts community.

Although there may be some resistance to the idea from our arts leadership we agree with the mayor that our transit arts selection committee include some ordinary citizens, not connected to the arts community. What better individual to serve on this committee than the transit rider. After all, he or she is the person who will be looking at this artwork, long after most of the art creators have collected their commissions and left town.

In order to get a better sampling of public opinion we think no less than 2 or 3 transit patrons, from a broad and diverse background, be selected. We need to expose these people to

transit artwork created in other cities, as well as street art. We found the street art in the pacific northwest cities of Portland and Seattle, while conservative, to be excellent. Let's see what our transit riders like or dislike. They will be living with it on a daily basis.

Garage

(Continued from Page 2)

a "roundhouse". Today's diesel engines are stored in a "shop". Streetcars were never stored in a garage, but in a "car barn". The term car barn could properly be used to describe a light rail storage facility, however CATS is also building a facility to maintain its light rail vehicles as part of this building. This same thing has been done in almost every other city that has built light rail. Hence the term "light rail maintenance facility".

Some may argue with some validity that if that is the case instead of a bus garage on South Tryon Street, the new building should therefore be called a "bus maintenance facility. Garage is just the most common terminology used to describe a bus storage facility. The skills that are needed to maintain a light rail vehicle are very different, and more specialized, if for no other reason than there are fewer light rail cars to maintain. This is not to belittle the work done by bus maintenance workers. They are facing new challenges, such as learning to maintain new lower-emission buses that will be using alternative fuel sources.

It all boils down simply to using the proper terminology most commonly used when referring to each differing form of transportation. Now please excuse us. We are off to the station—oops! The airport, to catch our plane.

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Your membership entitles you to one year of the quarterly CEMT Newsletter and occasional news releases. We monitor all public transit meetings. Please take a minute to help us keep you informed. Thank you!

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