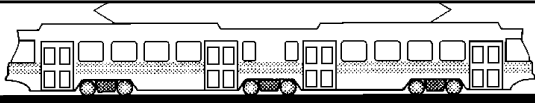


Citizens For Efficient Mass Transit



Winter 2002

Vol. 6, Issue No. 1

Operating Cost of Transit a Major Concern

The Valley Transit Authority (VTA) that runs the bus and light rail system in San Jose, CA, and the nearby Silicon Valley, faces a deficit of such proportions it will need \$146 million a year just to keep from going broke. It will need a total of \$6 billion over the next 20 years to pay for currently planned transit service. This has nothing to do with building new light rail or busways. This is money needed to operate what they already have in place or have plans to operate.

Why should we care about San Jose? Because the time will come sooner than we think when we will have to think about something far more “scary” than the “up-front” cost of building a rapid transit system. That is the cost of operating and maintaining the system. That is the cost of operating and maintaining the system once it is built, and doing so largely without federal assistance.

Some of VTA’s problems are related to the current recession, which has hit the Silicon Valley area particularly hard. With the deepening recession comes far fewer riders and much less income from sales tax collections to balance the budget. While we here in Charlotte seem to be completely consumed over the cost of building a system we run the serious risk of ignoring the far more serious problem of seeing to it that the system we build has the lowest possible operating and maintenance costs.

Critics will say VTA did all the right things. They built light rail with its lower operating costs and avoided busways. However the cost of their light rail was higher because there were few existing right-of-way corridors that could be used. Therefore streets had to be rebuilt to handle light rail in many areas.

The cost of all this seemed justified as the Silicon Valley was in the middle of one of the greatest economic booms this county has seen in the last 50 years. Who could have predicted a 21% drop in sales tax revenues last year alone, resulting in a \$71 million decline in revenues.

The point of all this is we need to pay greater attention to decisions that will effect future operating costs. These decisions will ultimately prove far more important than the construction costs of our new transit system, a large part of which will be paid for with federal dollars. This brings to our mind the question “Can we take the risk of building two full scale busways? Busways with their higher labor and maintenance costs? Busways that attract fewer riders and therefore generate less revenue? Busways that promote less economic development and less benefit for each dollar invested?”

Again we need to ask ourselves why other cities have avoided busways. Don’t think for a minute there is not a reason! Are we so much smarter than they are?



The new Portland Oregon streetcar
The new Portland Oregon streetcar is a scaled down version of light rail, providing many of the same benefits of light rail at 35 to 40% of the cost. Cars similar to these have been proposed for Central Avenue and Trade Street in Charlotte.

Which Version of Busway Will be Offered?

By Bob Bischoff

At a meeting of the Metropolitan Transit Commission last October 30th, Martin Cramton, head of the Charlotte/Mecklenburg Planning Commission gave a glowing speech about the amount of development that had occurred along the Pittsburgh busways. He said between 1983 and 1996 that 54 developments had taken place with a total value of \$300 million. He said 44% of that development had taken place near the busway stations.

We recently rode all the Pittsburgh busways and failed to see hardly any of this development. However, will take all his figures at face value. \$300 million of development in thirteen years—didn’t our little trolley, running without wire on a mile of track in South End, cause that much

(Continued on Page 3)

The Other Forgotten Corridor

A while back we delved into the possibilities of utilizing the old Piedmont and Northern right of way for Charlotte-Gastonia commuter/regional rail service. It was one of two railroad corridors left out of the Charlotte Area Transit System's five corridor transit master plan for 2025.

Now a look at the original Norfolk Southern Railroad line which ran almost 400 miles from Charlotte to Norfolk, Virginia with a number of connected branch lines along the way. The section running between Charlotte and the Albemarle area is still in service operated by the shortline Aberdeen Carolina and Western Railroad. This in our opinion is ripe territory for commuter/regional passenger rail service in the future. Let's take a look at how it might work.

The service would originate or terminate at the new Multi-Modal Transportation Center on West Trade Street in Charlotte. The center is already planned to serve CATS' Charlotte-Mooresville service which could be operating as early as 2007. That's in addition to all the Amtrak trains already running.

Heading north the Norfolk Southern mainline would be used for the commuter service to north of the NS freight yard. At this point the service could take the existing connection track to the AC&W, but other possibilities do exist. The section of AC&W track through the No-Da (North Davidson) community is in the path of the proposed Northeast Corridor light rail service planned by CATS. It may be possible to turn that right of way over to CATS and construct a new alignment for the AC&W and the proposed commuter rail service.

Heading north of the NS freight yard an additional track could be constructed along the east side of NS's existing mainline. This extra track would run north of 36th Street to just south of the Craighead Road crossing (which is to be closed by NC DOT soon). At this point a bridge over Davidson Street would be built to carry the line to the east behind industry that fronts Anderson Street. This is now wooded land that buffers the industry from the residential neighborhood further south. The line would go east until reaching the existing AC&W tracks which cross Anderson Street. At this point the existing tracks would be used for the vast majority of the line to the Albemarle in Stanly County. The old tracks between Anderson Street and Davidson Street near 36th could be removed from the middle of the residential neighborhood, and the land reclaimed for neighborhood use.

Moving eastward, potential station stops might include:

- Eastway Drive (small park & ride, and walk-up)
- Harris Blvd. station located off Kimmerly Glen south of Harris Blvd. (large park & ride)
- Guice Crossing on Parkton Road just off Albemarle Road and Wilgrove-Mint Hill Road (park & ride)
- I-485 (major park & ride, Mint Hill multi-modal interface)

- Old Camden Road (park & ride) Cabarrus County
- Midland at US 601 (large park & ride) Cabarrus County
- Stanfield at NC 200 (community and park & ride) also would serve nearby Locust
- Oakboro at NC 205/NC 742 (community and park and ride)
- Aquadale at NC 138 (community and park & ride)
- Porter between Norwood and Albemarle (park and ride)
- Albemarle downtown at WSS station off US 52

The proposed line would run 40 to 45 miles in length depending on routing. As mentioned the AC&W would be used for the majority of the line, with some new trackage needed between Oakboro/Aquadale and Albemarle. The remainder of the line would utilize the Winston-Salem Southbound Railway trackage south of Albemarle.

Three options for getting into Albemarle have been formulated for discussion purposes. There may be other options as well, but these seem to be the best options to us:

Option 1 - Divert from AC&W east of Oakboro at Old School Road. From this point 9 miles of new track would parallel Prince Road and Reap Road, cross NC 138 south of Albemarle, and connect to the WSS RR north of Southside Road. This option would not have stations in Aquadale or Porter, but could have a station at NC 138 southwest of Albemarle. Most direct route.

Option 2 - Divert from AC&W east of Aquadale at Stanly School Road and follow the eastside of Cottonville Road to connect to the WSS RR south of Porter. Only about one mile of new track needed to connect the AC&W to WSS RR. Least costly to link the two railroads together.

(Continued on Page 3)

Citizens For Efficient Mass Transit



For editorial comments and correspondence:
P.O. Box 35571, Charlotte NC 28235-5571

Editor, Co-President, Treasurer.....Bob Bischoff
Editor, Co-President.....Martin Wheeler
Art Production/Communications Bonnie Blum

Membership Address
P.O. Box 35571, Charlotte NC 28235-5571

Visit our web site at:
<http://home.adelphia.net/~bablum/cemt.htm>

Can Iredell Afford to Ignore the Southern End?

A recent article in the Charlotte Observer stated that Steve Johnson, chairman of the Iredell Board of County Commissioners will oppose any funding for commuter rail service to Mooresville. He is quoted as saying "Iredell County doesn't have any money for something like that."

Does "something like that" include public transportation for its citizens? Do people in Mooresville and southern Iredell County pay fewer tax dollars than those in the northern half of the county? Granted, the more rural northern half of the county does not have the commuting problems of the southern end of that county. Maybe Commissioner Johnson doesn't have to sit in rush hour traffic on I-77 every workday. But how about a little compassion for his neighbors that do?

Commissioner Johnson is further quoted as saying "For us to assume responsibility of this magnitude is going to require a significant tax increase." Couldn't he at least wait like his fellow commissioners until he has some idea of what the actual costs are going to be before issuing that statement? How about the costs?

We expect Iredell County likes all the growth that is occurring in the southern end of that county, if for no other reason than the added tax revenue new industry such as the Lowe's and racing team headquarters will provide. However, you can't always have it all without giving something in return. With that growth will come some added responsibilities, one of which will be to provide adequate public transportation for all Iredell citizens. That especially includes the ones that are providing most of the new sources of revenue for the county.

The Other Forgotten Corridor

(continued from Page 2)

Option 3 - Divert from AC&W in Aquadale and follow the east side of NC 138 to north of Southside Road before connecting with the WSS RR. About 8 miles of new track needed. There is no station in Porter with this option.

The line ideally would be upgraded with continuous welded rail, signaling, and additional grade crossing protection. Maximum speed would be 79 mph. The line could be built in phases, perhaps starting with service from Uptown Charlotte to Midland (US 601) in Union County. Under this scenario the line would have two major park and ride locations at US 601 and I-485. To begin with rush hour commuter rail service could be provided mornings and afternoons, with later expansion to some midday service.

Note: This service was identified by NC DOT as a potential future commuter rail corridor in 1999. Check it out on their web site at www.bytrain.org.

It seems to us that as long as they continue paying Iredell county taxes, the citizens of southern Iredell are due the same consideration as the rest of its citizens.

Which Version of Busway Will be Offered?

(Continued from Page 1)

development in about half the time? And in Pittsburgh only 44% was near the busway stations! How far away was the rest of it? Could it all be directly attributed to the busway?

While standing at a station near the midway point on the East Pittsburgh busway I witnessed a major crime in which a young man was badly beaten by a large gang at the shelter on the opposite side of the busway. Three squad cars responded to his rescue. This is not to say this could not happen at a light rail station. However, in three days of riding Pittsburgh's light rail lines there were no such incidents. My point here is that the busways in Pittsburgh did not appear to me to command a large scale development opportunities.

If Pittsburgh's busways are drawing all that interest from developers why is it that it is rarely ever mentioned in real estate advertising? A sample of several days of listings in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* turned up dozens of listings mentioning "close to light rail," while very few mentioned "close to bus line" and **none** mentioned the busway specifically.

I think the next question we need to ask is what kind of busway model we are planning to build here in Charlotte? Will it be the plain, utilitarian Pittsburgh model, or the lavish and expensive Ottawa model? The fancier Ottawa busway might attract more riders, and with a great deal of luck, maybe even a little development. However, has that costly Ottawa model been put into our budget? We understand one bus station on the Ottawa busway cost \$20 million. If we spend that kind of money on our busways, might the gap between light rail and busway costs come much closer to meeting? These are questions we would like to hear discussed.

Short Cuts



The Charlotte Area Transit System and Norfolk Southern appear very close to finalizing a deal on the Charlotte-Mooresville "O" line and sections of right of way along the "Old R" and "R" lines on Charlotte's southside. CATS hopes to have Full Funding Agreement by Summer and construction beginning on the South Corridor light rail line in October. Preliminary engineering will begin soon on the Charlotte - Mooresville commuter rail line.

Pineville will not be the end of the South Corridor

The last mile of the South Corridor light rail line will not be built. Most of you already know Pineville has decided they did not want light rail extended into their town because in order for it to be a success, and pay for its construction costs, higher density development would need to be built in the community.

We have said before, and continue to believe Pineville is making a big mistake. Accepting higher density would have created a more pedestrian friendly downtown Pineville, that would revitalize Main Street, and give the center of town enough character to stand out in a sea of commercial and retail development that surrounds it.

We talked to several merchants on Main Street that agreed with this idea. However, this view was not shared by Pineville town officials. We never heard very much from the citizens of Pineville in regard to this subject. There did not appear to be any large ground-swell of demand for light rail as far as we could tell however.

This being the case it appears Pineville will be omitted from future rapid transit plans, with South Corridor light rail terminating about one mile to the north of I-485. CATS is

probably not too upset over Pineville's decision because they will save about \$30 million by not building the last mile of light rail into the center of Pineville. They can therefore use this money for upgrades or cost over-runs on the balance of the corridor.

We feel the rejection of light rail was just another bad decision on the part of Pineville, however, it was their's to make. Since they were at the end of the line, their decision does not impact any communities further down their line.

We respect their right to decide on their own destiny. Unfortunately if they ever change their mind it is unlikely any funding will be available, because it is our understanding that all the other corridors will now be funded ahead of Pineville, and there is little likelihood there is going to be any money left over.

There is the possibility at some time in the future commuter rail might be extended through Pineville down to Rock Hill. The impact of this, however, will be much less than light rail, either for good or bad. It is probably still many years away, and when it comes it is at first likely to be limited to a few morning and evening rush hour trains.

Your Membership Will Help Us Help You!

Please help us continue our fight for the best possible transit system for the Charlotte area. Become a member of Citizen's for Efficient Mass Transit. We are a totally volunteer, non-profit organization.

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!

Name _____
Address _____
City _____
State _____ Zip Code _____
Phone (____) _____ Fax (____) _____

Citizens for Efficient Mass Transit Membership

- Annual membership dues rate:
- Regular / Individual \$15.00
 - Student / Senior \$10.00
 - Additional donations _____

Mail this section with your check or money order to:

Bob Bischoff, Treasurer
Citizens for Efficient Mass Transit
P.O. Box 35571
Charlotte NC 28235-5571

email address _____