

City explores possibility of public rail

By KATHRYN EAKENS
Leader Staff

With the city nearing implementation of an express connector to the Tech Ridge Capital Metro Park and Ride facility in north Austin, Round Rock is now looking at another way to tie into the Capital Metro system.

Chief of Public Works Operations Tom Word presented a number of regional commuter rail possibilities for the city –

including one that would tie the city into Capital Metro's soon-to-be finished Red Line from downtown Austin to Leander – to the city council at its Thursday meeting.

Still only in a preliminary study phase, the plan that received the most positive council feedback would begin where Capital Metro's Red Line curves along McNeil Road and follow state Highway 45 – within the existing right-of-way – to where it intersects with

Interstate 35.

"What we discovered is that along SH 45 from the big turn in the rail (along McNeil) to Dell is four-and-a-half miles," Word said.

To build that 4.5 miles to rail and buy two train sets similar to what Capital Metro uses would cost an estimated \$50 million – 80 percent of which would be eligible for funding from the federal government.

"So for roughly \$10 million we could have the capital facilities to tie Round Rock to the rest of

the system and have access from Round Rock to downtown Austin, UT and so on and bring people from Cedar Park and Leander and Austin to job opportunities here," Word said.

He also said it would be feasible to continue along SH 45 to where the toll road intersects with the Missouri/Kansas/Texas railroad and turn north following the abandoned tracks' right-of-way.

See RAIL, page 5A

Round Rock Leader

Tuesday, September 30, 2008

RAIL: City might work on regional plan with neighboring cities

Continued from page 1A

"We could have a station near the Higher Education Center and a station in Georgetown. And if Pflugerville wanted to participate as well, if you turn south along the railroad, it's only about three miles to the old downtown of Pflugerville," Word said. "So it's possible to develop a system here with the partners of Georgetown, Pflugerville and Round Rock to develop rail in our region that would tie us to the rest of the capital area."

There is also the possibility of a partnership with the

Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority, which is currently enabling legislation to allow the entity to build and operate passenger rail and airports.

"If we were to look at extending it beyond one station, we think it would make sense to bring in someone else as kind of a general manager – someone who could build these kinds of projects and operate them instead of us," Word said. "We have visited with the CTRMA, the regional mobility authority for the area, and they're very interested in the concept."

No total annual

operating costs or estimates for the MKT section of rail have been determined yet, but Word said if the city decided to move forward with the project in the future, it could be possible to have it operational within five years.

The Red Line connection study was spurred by interest from a number of other entities in bringing rail service to the city – including the Austin-San Antonio Intermunicipal Commuter Rail District, which has proposed a railway from Georgetown to San Antonio.

"The northern extent

from Georgetown down to Round Rock would be built along the abandoned MKT right-of-way," Word said. "At that point their proposal is to turn and use the Union Pacific line that runs through Round Rock just outside our City Hall and parallel to McNeil through Austin."

The proposed system includes 15 stations along 112 miles of railway, with Round Rock's station located across the street from City Hall in the downtown area.

"One of the things that troubled us about the Austin-San Antonio proposal was the

downtown station," Word said. "While it's pretty cool to have a downtown rail station, we don't have many people who live downtown and we don't have a lot of jobs downtown."

"We do have a lot of jobs on the south side of town along state Highway 45. In fact, we probably have 14,000 jobs within a mile of the intersection of I-35 and SH 45."

Word identified a number of benefits that could be associated with a railway connecting to the Capital Metro system, including economic development and possible reduction in vehicle miles

traveled.

"We're not going to stand here and tell you we're not going to have to add another lane to some facility because it doesn't do that kind of thing," he said. "But it does provide alternatives to people who don't drive, can't drive or just want an alternative."

The city plans to continue to evaluate the feasibility of such a railway, and Mayor Alan McGraw said the implementation of the Red Line from downtown Austin to Leander could help answer many of the council's current questions concerning logistics and public interest.