

TEXRail backers ready to push for longer route



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Community members and officials board at North Side Station for one of the inaugural TEXRail rides on Dec. 31. The commuter line then lured 11,000 riders in its first weekend.

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FORT WORTH

Commuter rail supporters in Fort Worth say the time to strike is while the iron is hot.

Officials at the new TEXRail train line, which lured more than 11,000 riders in its first weekend, say they want to take advantage of all the buzz created by the service and immediately begin expansion plans.

The commuter line, which connects Fort Worth, North Richland Hills, Grapevine and DFW Airport, currently only goes as far south as the Texas & Pacific Station in downtown Fort Worth.

But officials at Trinity Metro, the transit agency that owns TEXRail, believe it's realistic to

extend the line another 1.5 miles to the southwest and open another station in Fort Worth's medical district — possibly in three to four years, if they get started now.

Scott Mahaffey, Trinity Metro board chairman, believes it would be possible to extend service to the medical district within that time frame if the agency initiates the process now, and if there are no funding or bureaucratic bumps in the road. He also would like TEXRail to go another two miles to the south and open a station near Cleburne Road and West Berry Street, to serve nearby Texas Christian University.

"We already have the designs. We know the route. We know what needs to be done," Mahaffey told members of a Trinity Metro committee this week. The

committee voted unanimously to recommend to the Trinity Metro board to immediately initiate expansion plans — an item that the Trinity Metro full board will be asked to consider at its next monthly meeting.

"We have the partners we need to serve the medical district, and TCU," Mahaffey said, referring to the elected officials and other area leaders who have praised the quality of TEXRail's service during its initial week.

WHAT ABOUT THE MONEY?

Using rough estimates, Trinity Metro senior vice president Bob Baulsir told the committee that TEXRail could be extended to the medical district for about \$130 million, and to TCU for another \$70 million.

But much of that cost could be covered by money that is

already in hand, officials said.

The just-opened portion of TEXRail was expected to cost more than \$1 billion, but Trinity Metro officials say they came in tens of millions of dollars under budget. Officials declined to provide an exact balance, saying they expect to continue paying contractors' invoices for a few months.

Trinity Metro would need the permission of the Federal Transit Administration to use those funds on the extension, which could be complicated if the federal agency considers the proposed TEXRail extension a whole new project that needs to start anew. If it's considered a whole new project, it would need to get in line for funding with a couple dozen other

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planned transit projects in the United States.

Also, although an environmental study was completed several years ago that included the stations in the medical district and near TCU, that study would have to be re-opened and updated, a process that could take a year or more and require public hearings.

And, perhaps most importantly, Trinity Metro would need permission from the Fort Worth & Western Railroad, which owns the tracks connecting T&P Station to the medical district, to run passenger trains on the

line. When Trinity Metro sought Fort Worth & Western's help for the original piece of TEXRail between the North Side Station and Grapevine, the negotiations dragged on for years before the railroad agreed to allow service.

Officials with Fort Worth & Western declined Thursday to comment on the proposed TEXRail extension.

Also, Trinity Metro does not own property near its proposed station site. One option would be to negotiate with one of the area hospitals to provide land for a station. Baylor Scott

& White All Saints operates a medical center with a parking lot adjacent to the railroad tracks, and that property was identified as a viable alternative in the original TEXRail environmental review.

Other hospitals within a mile of the proposed medical district station would include Cook Children's Medical Center, Medical City Fort Worth and Texas Health Harris Methodist.

Getting any sort of rail line built in three to four years seems incredibly ambitious, but area businesses are lining up in support of the plan.

"There's funding that needs to be secured, but I also think that if we're talking about a shorter extension then I think it's much more manageable

than a long extension," said Mike Brennan, president of Near Southside Inc., a non-profit organization that represents businesses and other organizations south of downtown.

Near Southside Inc. also wants to push for more frequent bus service connecting both T&P Station and the proposed medical district station to nearby neighborhoods, Brennan said. Right now, four bus routes serve the area, but with buses approximately every 30 minutes — whereas bus service every 15 minutes is considered more desirable in making neighborhoods more walkable, bike-friendly and ripe for transit-oriented development.

As for the proposed TCU station, Trinity Metro al-

ready owns several acres of land that can be used for a station near West Berry Street and Cleburne Road. The area was originally supposed to have a TEXRail station on day one of commuter rail service, but those plans were scaled back — and the first phase of TEXRail limited to only the portion of the commuter line from downtown Fort Worth to the north — to help it qualify for federal funding.

Trinity Metro also owns land for future TEXRail stations near Interstate 20 and Granbury Road, as well as land near Summer Creek area of southwest Fort Worth, near Chisholm Trail Parkway.

Some city officials would like to pursue extension of TEXRail all the

way to the southwestern edge of Fort Worth.

Fort Worth Councilman Jungus Jordan, who represents a southwest tract of the city with potential TEXRail stops, said he would "demand" that the commuter line expand to the southwest as rapidly as possible. He would like to see the line continued close to the 80-acre Tarleton State University campus currently under construction along Chisholm Trail Parkway.

"The issue of transit is critical," he said, "particularly as we grow."

But most TEXRail supporters agree the first step is to extend TEXRail 1.5 miles to the medical district.

Staff writer Luke Ranker contributed to this report.