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Subject

Response to Assertions Made on Light Rail Cost Estimate

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This morning, an [Austin Monitor story](#) quoted Urban Transportation Commission (UTC) member Cynthia Weatherby calling into question the accuracy of data that the Central Austin CDC has furnished to City Council.

An appointee of Mayor Adler, Commissioner Weatherby expressed views on the cost estimate for the \$397.5 million for the 5.3-mile Guadalupe-North Lamar Light Rail Minimum Operable Segment at Tuesday's UTC meeting:

"I'm personally convinced that this proposal is very premature," said Weatherby, whose resume includes two separate stints at the Texas A&M Transportation Institute. "And with the background that I have in transportation, specifically rail transit planning, I don't think it's based on reality. I have zero faith in the cost estimates."

Weatherby said she reached out to the CACDC's Scott Morris to learn more details about the proposal, "and that even convinced me more that it's not based on reality."

The Central Austin CDC categorically rejects the assertions made by Commissioner Weatherby at the UTC meeting and requests that she clarify her statements.

The estimate Commissioner Weatherby references was part of an order of magnitude study *Average Unit Cost Per Element for a Group of Projects* conducted in May by Central Austin CDC board member Andrew Clements. The purpose of the study was to establish an average cost per mile for light rail starter systems, so that an estimated cost of the Guadalupe-North Lamar minimum operable segment could be determined. A model developed by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) was populated with only the actual, invoiced costs of 16 light rail systems nationwide.

Commissioner Weatherby was furnished a copy of the *Average Unit Cost Per Element for a Group of Projects* study on August 6th at her request.

The Central Austin CDC cost estimate of \$397.5 million has been reviewed by several transit professionals, both internally to our group, and independently by third party review. Those reviews have concurred with that estimate, and have characterized it as in-line with costs that would be experienced for the light rail starter project proposed. We are privileged to have on our team Dave Dobbs, Lyndon Henry, and Surinder Marwaha who were involved in the previous

planning efforts since the late 1980s. Of the three decades of study and cost estimates have gone into the corridor, these include studies submitted to FTA.

Most prominent among the third party reviewers was Jeff Wood, a former Austinite and Principal of The Overhead Wire, a consulting firm in San Francisco and the host of the National Transportation Podcast Talking Headways. He offered his opinion of the \$397.5 million estimate:

"The cost seems reasonable. You don't have tunnels, bridges, or any major obstacles so it shouldn't be a big deal. And you'd be repaving Guadalupe which I'm sure they have to do anyway. The only thing might be unforeseen utility relocation. Not sure how much of that would be on that street, especially north of 38th."

This proposal was also discussed with the members of the executive staff of Capital Metropolitan Transit Authority (CMTA) on March 31st and on June 29th. On CMTA's initiative, an informal staff review was completed on our proposal and the cost estimate element was assessed as *"in the ballpark"* for planning purposes. Our team has a very good relationship with Capital Metro, and are very grateful for the feedback that was offered.

We requested meetings to discuss this proposal with executive staff in the Office of the City Manager and the Austin Transportation Department, but they declined the request.

We stand by the estimate of \$397.5 million as a solid, data-driven figure that is sufficient to place on the ballot and to build the system described. We recommend using 100% local funds with no match to fast track the MOS, and have shown with data that \$397.5 million would be sufficient for that purpose. Our proposal is \$75 million/mile ($397.5 \div 5.3 \text{ miles} = 75$). Houston's first 7.5-mile light rail line was fast tracked with 100% local funds in this manner, and calculated for inflation was \$57.9 million/mile. Houston's line, in 2016 dollars, was well below our \$75 mm/mile estimate.

Additionally, the ability to also seek a fallback matching grant from the FTA's New Starts program should allay any concern that the voter authorization of \$400 million would not be enough to complete construction on the alignment, even if very large unforeseen contingencies emerged, such adding to the length of the MOS to reach an operations and maintenance site.

Our grassroots coalition is made up of volunteers donating their time, and our team is uncompensated. We still take great lengths to ensure the accuracy of all information presented to policymakers. We will continue to deliver products to policymakers that have the highest standard of professional quality and that can be relied upon to make sound decisions.

What is Light Rail?

Light rail is a form of mass transit that runs on electricity with trains that can carry hundreds of passengers at once, on frequent schedules of departures and arrivals. Light rail combines attributes of heavy rapid transit found in subway-type trains with the flexibility of street-running vehicles. In comparing how forms of surface-running transit react as demand increases, buses, express buses, and bus rapid transit require an increase in frequency and more vehicles and drivers to be added. By simply adding a car to the train, light rail vehicles have a uniquely scalable capacity. Light rail was the mode chosen in the FTA-approved study that led to a 2000 referendum to build an MOS in the City of Austin.

What is a Minimum Operable Segment MOS?

A minimum operable segment (MOS) is a designation that defines the shortest planned segment possible of a transportation system that would be built at the lowest cost possible, while maintaining service effectiveness. MOS is often used when describing a starter line of a larger system, whether a phase one of light rail or other fixed guideway mode.

About The Central Austin Community Development Corporation

The Central Austin CDC has been privileged to serve as a community organizer at a most unique time in our city's history. Over the last five years, we have engaged the public to work on an issue of utmost importance: planning for Austin's first phase investment of light rail. This work has empowered a diverse coalition of communities, non-profit groups, transit professionals, and light rail advocates. A consensus vision has emerged from this grassroots process for a north-south, expandable backbone of high ridership light rail service in the Guadalupe-North Lamar Corridor.

Resources

Average Unit Cost for a Group of Projects-Light Rail 2000-2016 by Andrew Clements AIA

Average Unit Cost for a Group of Projects-Light Rail 2000-2016.pdf

Austin Light Rail: A New Proposal for 2016

http://centralaustincdc.org/transportation/austin_light_rail.htm

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