

aart_

austin area rapid transit

Integrated Regional and Urban Rail for Central Texas: A Concept

(May 1, 2006)

1. THE CENTRAL TEXAS POPULATION EXPLOSION

Through the Envision Central Texas process, we have embarked upon a planning exercise for the Central Texas Region, consisting of Travis, Williamson, Hays, Bastrop, and Caldwell counties. If the population of this area is to double within the next 20 years – as is being predicted – the additional people will have to be accommodated somewhere, and they will have to have “more than just roads” to get from place to place within the region. What “more than just roads” will be is a big question.

2. WHAT WILL **aart_ DO ABOUT IT?**

austin area rapid transit (aart) is a concept for an integrated regional and urban rail answer to that big question. It makes possible rapid travel from the outlying population centers in the region to those population centers closer to the central magnet of Austin, and also within Austin itself, in addition to offering the possibility to live in one corner of the region and work in another, and to travel back and forth between them, without necessitating urban sprawl.

3. HOW WOULD **aart_ DO IT?**

aart_ calls for the re-use of most existing rail rights-of-way, and for the planning and eventual acquisition of new rights-of-way, to build a regional rail system that ultimately will stretch from Austin out to the surrounding towns of Liberty Hill, Georgetown, Taylor, Elgin, Bastrop, San Marcos, and Dripping Springs, and the many population centers between. It connects all the surrounding towns and cities with Austin, the Austin-Bergstrom International Airport, and with the future TransTexas Corridor high-speed rail to connect Austin, San Antonio, Houston, Dallas/Fort Worth, and Waco.

4. WHAT'S INTEGRATED ABOUT IT?

Four regional lines come into Austin from the surrounding region, and pass through the Warehouse District of Austin as did passenger rail of the past but now on a larger scale. Lines coming from the northwest and southwest converge in the Seaholm area, on the western side of downtown, then pass through downtown on (and eventually under) 3rd Street, through East Austin, and diverge after passing the Capital Metro HQ, and continue out to the Eastern and Southern areas of Central Texas. The bundling of the lines between Seaholm and Capital Metro HQ constitutes the **Cross-Town Connector** – regional rail trains serving in the role of urban rail for downtown and East Austin riders, as well as for the commuters coming in from all sides of the region.

This ***Cross-Town Connector*** has two-way tracks with the downtown portion (Seaholm to Plaza Saltillo) eventually to be placed below grade in a ~1.5-mile tunnel, so eliminating all conflict with street level auto traffic. It will intersect at least two proposed north-south urban rail lines serving the urban areas of Austin itself (***U1 and U2 on the maps***), thus integrating the two systems into a single system and making it possible to ride to any destination on the entire integrated rail system with only one weather-protected transfer. At the surface, crosstown buses and streetcars will feed the system from less densely developed areas. Park & Ride facilities will be provided at outer regional and urban rail stations, thus integrating automobiles into the overall public transportation system.

5. **HOW WOULD THE *aart* REGIONAL SYSTEM BE CONFIGURED?** (See concept maps)

Line S1 will approximate Austin/San Antonio Rail District's (ASArail's) "Commuter Rail District" route, connecting northern "end station," **Georgetown** – *via the MKT ("Katy," or "MoKan") R.O.W. route* – through **Pflugerville** and downtown and **southwest Austin** to southern "end station," **San Marcos**. May 6, 2006

Line S2 will use CapMetro's commuter rail line from "end station" **Liberty Hill** – *via the MoPac R.O.W.* – through **downtown Austin**, and - *via new R.O.W.* – to Austin-Bergstrom International Airport (**ABIA**), and later be extended - *via new R.O.W.* – to southeastern region "end station," **Bastrop**, (or **Smithville**).

Line S3 will connect northeastern "end station" **Taylor** – *via MoPac R.O.W.* – through **downtown Austin** and - *via new R.O.W.* – to southeastern "end station," **Lockhart** (or **Luling**).

Line S4 will connect southwestern "end station," **Dripping Springs** – *via new R.O.W.* – through downtown Austin and – *via Capital Metro's future commuter rail line through Manor* to "end station," **Elgin**.

6. **WHAT TYPES OF ROLLING STOCK (VEHICLES) WOULD *aart* USE?**

aart's suggested regional trains are heavy metro rail, and urban trains are light rail, both powered by clean, quiet, and efficient electricity – not soon-to-be scarce hydrocarbon diesel. Even busses will eventually be electrically- powered. All station platforms will be built flush with the railcar floors, thus permitting rapid egress/ingress (maximum 20 seconds, total), and enabling easy use by children, bike riders, and disabled passengers.

7. **WHY DO WE NEED SUCH AN AMBITIOUS CONCEPT?**

Austin's past transportation planning has been hampered by the Federal Transportation Administration's (FTA's) federal funding process, which emphasizes "projects" over long-range systems planning. Indeed, the original November 2000 proposal may have lost the election because many voters thought while it cost a lot of money, they couldn't figure out how they would ever benefit from it. What is needed is not only a "starter route" design, but a "big picture" CONCEPT, with phased implementation over 30 years, or more.

aart is a **CONCEPTUAL PLAN** only; it will evolve. It supports Envision Central Texas' recommended Regional Plan "D," incorporates CapMetro's "All Systems Go" and ASArail's commuter line, but looks out beyond their more limited scopes.

aart provides the framework concept to follow (and also to adjust, as needed) in both accommodating the existing population in the region, and in helping to drive the form of future development, as Central Texas **DOUBLES** in population over the next generation. This concept has been tried and proven elsewhere, with documented success. The integration of regional ("commuter") rail and urban rail will not only help solve point-to-point travel problems, but will bring thousands of pedestrians into the heart of Austin, feeding the revitalization of Downtown. It will also allow persons from a town anywhere on the system to easily visit any other town on the system, enabling increased business, and more housing, jobs, and recreational activity options throughout Central Texas. We either need to follow this concept for alternative transportation opportunities, or follow another one that is just as ambitious, for otherwise Central Texas may someday choke in its own exhaust.