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Tech honchos give rail effort a \$215,000 boost

Passenger rail opponents from 2000 are still on the sidelines as election approaches

By Ben Wear
 AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF
 Saturday, July 17, 2004

Supporters of Capital Metro's coming effort to begin passenger rail service in Austin have amassed a \$215,000 campaign beachhead, all of it from just six donors, according to campaign finance reports filed this week.

That early fund raising puts the political action committee, [Right Track PAC](#), roughly a quarter of the way to the almost \$900,000 supporters raised in 2000 when a \$1.9 billion, 52-mile light rail system was submitted for voter approval. It was rejected by fewer than 2,000 votes.

[Opponents](#), meanwhile, have yet to get a potential counter-campaign in gear.

Right Track, formed in April to raise money for the November rail election that Capital Metro's board is likely to call, got the bulk of its early money from executives now or formerly associated with Dell Inc., including \$100,000 from company founder Michael Dell. Dell and his wife, Susan, also gave \$100,000 in 2000. Other computer industry executives gave generously to that effort as well.

According to the report for the period ending June 30, retired Dell President Mort Topfer gave \$50,000 to Right Track PAC, and former Dell chief financial officer Tom Meredith and his wife, Lynn, gave \$25,000.

"It's the tech boys again," said Travis County Commissioner Gerald Daugherty, who led the effort against rail in 2000. "I cannot believe Michael Dell gave another \$100,000."

Dell could not be reached for comment.

Daugherty and his associates [have remained on the sidelines so far](#). They have raised no money and formed no political action committee. Nonetheless, Daugherty, who was not yet a county commissioner in 2000, said he will be forming some sort of entity and raising money before it's all over.

"When I'm going to do it, I don't know," he said. "I have no time."

Capital Metro board Chairman Lee Walker, who was out of the country on vacation and unavailable for comment, was for several years president of Dell in the company's infancy. Lowell Lebermann, co-treasurer of Right Track PAC, said that subsequent finance reports would show many more donors.

"We'll be sitting down and expanding this base," he said. "This is just a core base with which to go forward."

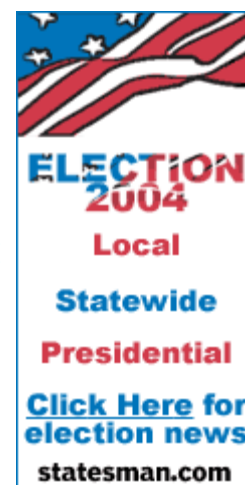
Right Track PAC has spent just \$38,240 so far, more than half of it on a "voter survey." The results of that survey were unavailable Friday.

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Just exactly what Right Track PAC and its money will advocate for remains up in the air. Capital Metro, cognizant that the high price tag and elimination of lanes on city streets for rail made some voters nervous in 2000, intends to ask voters for permission this time for a single passenger rail line on its existing freight rail track. That line would run from downtown to Leander, about 32 miles, and Capital Metro has said it can get it up and running for \$60 million to \$80 million.

The transit agency has been engaged since May in a "public outreach" effort, including workshops where those who showed up were given maps and markers and encouraged to suggest additions and other details. Agency officials say the final plan, likely to be approved by the Capital Metro board on Aug. 30 and then put before voters, should incorporate some of those suggestions.

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The six donors

Supporters of Capital Metro's anticipated rail election have raised \$215,000 for the campaign from just six donors:

Michael Dell, Dell Inc. founder: \$100,000

Mort Topfer, retired Dell president: \$50,000

Tom and Lynn Meredith, retired Dell executive and his wife: \$25,000

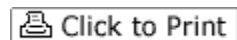
Julia Wilkinson, philanthropist: \$25,000

Perry Lorenz, downtown developer: \$10,000

Neil Webber, Vignette Inc. co-founder: \$5,000

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