

Transportation



The 21st Century Transportation Task Force; Rail Transit for Albuquerque?

by *JW Madison*

In 2006, Albuquerque Mayor Marty Chavez attempted to implement our city's first Rail transit system in at least 80 years. The first segment of this service, the "Red Chili Line", would feature sleek modern streetcars travelling daily on double track along Central between Atrisco and Carlisle ("Streetcar", whether modern, vintage or replica, can be thought of as "Light Light Rail" for this article).

Initially, this proposal enjoyed the backing of a majority of the City Council. But after a well-publicized outcry, several Councilors backed off, killing the deal. This outcry was not entirely flat-earth auto-centered idiocy; there were some real concerns about the length and location of the route, how to pay for it and the manner in which the proposal was being moved through the political process.

One response to this setback was the establishment of the 21st Century Transportation Task Force. Contrary to impressions fostered by the local media, this Task Force actually worked on other transportation issues besides the Streetcar---notably recommending a significant increase in funding for transit (including the Streetcar), bikeways, and pedestrian improvements.

The 21st Century Transportation Task Force

The 21st Century Transportation Task Force began meeting in January of 2008 to discuss the City's Quarter Cent Transportation Infrastructure Tax and comment on an independent cost-and-benefit analysis of the proposed modern streetcar transit system. The Task Force met a total of seventeen over an eight-month period.

The Task Force's charges, as contained in the Ordinance (O-07-71) that created the Task Force, included the following:

- A Develop an understanding of the adopted City policies regarding roadways, public transit, and other multi-modal transportation improvements as contained in the Albuquerque/Bernalillo County Comprehensive Plan and in other relevant documents;
- B Review the history, expenditures, and the needs associated with the current Transportation Infrastructure Tax;
- C Review current plans for expansion of the roadways, public transit system, and other multi-modal transportation improvements;
- D Familiarize itself with the Street Car system as proposed;
- E Familiarize itself with the relationship between land-use regulation, transit and pedestrian/bicycle use;
- F Monitor the progress of the cost and benefit analysis as described above and evaluate its findings and recommendations.
- G Generate a report or reports (majority and/or minority if necessary) summarizing the available information and making recommendations with

respect to the dedication of the Transportation Infrastructure Tax, the development of a Street Car in the context of roadway, city-wide public transit, and other multi-modal transportation improvements, and the financing of these improvements by September 1, 2008.

Through a series of presentations from City staff, Mid Region Council of Governments staff, and independent streetcar consultants Leland Consulting Group, the Task Force covered the first six of their seven charges. The final charge – to generate a report or reports – was accomplished through extensive group discussions, the development of a working outline and draft report, and ongoing revision of the outline and draft report with input from all members. All of this culminated in the 29-page Final Report that was recently submitted to Mayor Chavez and the City Council for their consideration.

Brief Summary of Recommendations:

Continuation of the 1/4_Cent Transportation Infrastructure Tax:

The Task Force unanimously recommended continuation of the 1/4_Cent Transportation Infrastructure Tax. Policy Recommendations for 5 Programs of the Tax: The recommendation to continue the tax is tied to new comprehensive policy recommendations for each of the tax’s five programs: road maintenance, road rehabilitation, road deficiencies, trails & bikeways, and transit.



Dedication of the Tax: The Task Force recommended that the original percentages allocated to the five programs of the tax be adjusted as follows (see charts):

- Road Rehabilitation: Decrease from “Not less than 32%” to 31%
- Road Maintenance: Decrease from 12% to 10%
- Road Deficiencies: Change from “Not more than 32%” to 15%
- Trails & Bikeways: Increase from 4% to 8%
- Transit: Increase from 20% to 36%

Modern Streetcar: A two thirds majority of the Task Force supported the concept, further analysis and development of the Modern Streetcar. However, the majority position recommendation would limit use of the transportation infrastructure tax to a minimum of 14% of the total proceeds, and only if leveraged on a 3 to 1 basis with other sources. These could include State and/or Federal support, private sponsorships, and a Tax Increment Development District (TIDD). The minority position on the Streetcar was supportive of the idea of developing rail transit in Albuquerque, but recommended against using any revenue from

the Transportation Infrastructure Tax.

In order for the recommendations contained in the Task Force’s report to become policy, the City Council will have to adopt legislation to specifically address enactment of the recommendations.

The work the Task Force accomplished was an important first step, but ongoing efforts are needed to educate the public and establish policies to guide the future of the city’s transportation and transit systems.

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