

Going my way? Mass transit must begin with best route

As members of the board of the Central Indiana Regional Transportation Authority, we've encountered an interesting mix of opinions. While the NIMBY ("Not in my backyard!") reactions receive the most attention, we also hear plenty of what you might call WIMBY ("When in my backyard?") comments, often from friends and neighbors in Hendricks County.



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One of the most common questions we get from constituents when they hear we serve as CIRTA board members is, "Why are we talking about building a mass transit line to Hamilton County first? Why not go west — especially when a new airport is about to open?"

The answer is that while we represent the folks in our area, our job as CIRTA board members is to do what's best for the region. Starting with the Northeast Corridor is indeed what's best for the region. The good news is that it's also what's best for the west side.

The best way to prove that mass transit can work in Central Indiana is to start in the area of greatest opportunity and lowest cost. After plenty of study and discussion, it was decided that running a line from Downtown Indianapolis to Hamilton County offered the winning opportunity-and-cost combination.

Much of it has to do with a typical alphabet soup of governmental and quasi-governmental organizations: the Metropolitan Planning Organization, the federally mandated agency responsible for transportation planning in the Indianapolis area; the Indianapolis Regional Transportation Council, a group of elected and appointed officials charged with overseeing regional transportation; and CIRTA, which will implement the chosen plan.

In April, the MPO recommended a vision for launching a new era of mass transit. After conducting research, talking to residents, and reviewing the experiences of other communities, they proposed as a starting point a commuter rail line running from Hamilton County to Downtown. The line would use the existing Nickel Plate rail bed, rely on diesel power, connect to a system of buses on Downtown streets, and be

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available as soon as three to five years.

Using the existing rail bed greatly lowers the cost and time of implementation. Plus, transportation planning models show that the projected population and job growth is greatest in that corridor, thus providing more potential for economic and transit-oriented development, not to mention alleviating traffic, giving commuters choices, and improving air quality.

But we have plenty of growth out west, too, and certainly our share of traffic. So, again, why not here?

The Hamilton County-to-Downtown line is seen as the first leg in a region-wide system. Success there will give us a track record on which we can build a system that will reach in every direction.

That initial success is important to attracting federal funds for expansion. Our counterparts in Nashville, Tenn., started with a route in an area that was not ideal and, as a result, have seen ridership well below projections. It's unlikely that it will attract federal support for future legs.

We would strongly advocate for an airport/Hendricks County line as soon as the first leg is successful and that, in the interim, express bus service be expanded to Hendricks County.

But it's important that we all take a bigger view because that will serve us best in the long run. This includes funding. A system that comprehensively serves Central Indiana will need to be funded with regional cooperation, and CIRTA is working with legislators to give definition to a proposal that allows local governments the authority to support its fair share of the system.

On Friday, the IRTC policy committee will vote on whether to move forward with the proposed Northeast Corridor route. While the organizations involved in this effort have heard from many citizens, we hope you will make your support for the region-wide vision known by posting a comment at www.cirta.us.

And we hope that, in a few years, when we cut the ribbon on Central Indiana's new mass transit system, you'll come take a ride with us, confident that, even if on that day we're not riding to our side of Indianapolis, we will ride into a future that includes mass transit for the entire Central Indiana region.

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9/23/08