

Critique is another blow for transit plan

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By: Bruce Siceloff

RALEIGH- As Wake County commissioners prepare to take up a 2-year-old proposed transit plan built around light rail and improved bus service, an influential business group is offering its own fresh view of the proposal - and throwing buckets of fresh, cold water on it.

The Regional Transportation Alliance has come out in favor of bus rapid transit, a hybrid that is gaining ground in U.S. cities as less expensive and more flexible than street cars and light rail - but faster and more enjoyable than regular buses. The buses have ways of moving faster than street traffic - sometimes with their own lanes, or with preferential treatment at stop lights - and riders often buy tickets before boarding at high-level platforms.

Linked to the Greater Raleigh Chamber of Commerce, the Regional Transportation Alliance has been successful at building support for big changes, such as the Triangle Expressway, and small ones, such as the Interstate 40 bus-on-shoulder program. The alliance began circulating a critique in August that endorses bus rapid transit for Wake "as a more effective and viable approach than the framework of the current plan."

The 13-page critique warns that proposed new standard bus service "will still be a system with infrequent routes along most corridors" and buses still stuck in traffic. It called the Durham-Raleigh-Garner commuter train line "very expensive for what it is projected to deliver."

Wake's planned light rail "is so expensive ... that by concentrating so many resources in a single corridor, it crowds out funding that could be used to increase the reach, frequency and reliability of travel options, as well as to create complementary corridor investments in more areas," the regional alliance critique says.

The critique is another blow to a plan that has gained little traction.

After refusing since 2011 even to discuss the plan, the Wake County commissioners finally are preparing to take it up. But they dread the chore and distrust the transit plan's local authors, so they have persuaded a trio of outside experts - two Florida-based scholars and Denver's former transit agency head - to give them a "fresh look" at a proposal that has acquired opponents and lost champions during its two stale years on the shelf.

The plan took shape in 2010 and 2011 under the guidance of David King, general manager of Triangle Transit, the regional bus service and planning agency, and County Manager David Cooke. It grew out of an earnest struggle to get transit right after Triangle Transit got it wrong with a quest for a 28-mile train network that lost federal funding in 2006 and never had strong local support in Wake.

A three-county citizen panel labored for months to build a new concept. After Triangle Transit experts refined it, King and Cooke shopped it around to all the local governments. Wake's 12 town and city boards focused on transit improvements that would serve local residents, and most of them gave the plan their blessing.

Cooke presented the Wake transit plan to county commissioners two years ago. He made a complicated and ambitious plan seem achievable and almost simple.

If Wake voters approve a transit sales tax, as Durham and Orange county voters did, Cooke said, we can promise them two things: We'll nearly double the bus service in a few years, and we'll launch a 37-mile rush-hour commuter train service from Durham through Research Triangle Park and downtown Raleigh to East Garner, with a big park-and-ride lot there for commuters who come to work from east of the Triangle.

Light-rail line

The Wake plan also includes an expensive light-rail line from Cary through downtown Raleigh to Millbrook Road in North Raleigh. But we can't promise it will get built, Cooke said, because we're not assured of winning necessary federal funding.

The Wake transit plan's biggest advocate was former Raleigh Mayor Charles Meeker, who left office two years ago. The city council still likes the proposal, as does the civic advocacy group WakeUp Wake County. The always-anti-transit John Locke Foundation still doesn't like it.

Now Clymer Cease, a Raleigh architect who is winding up a term as chairman of the Regional Transportation Alliance, says Wake County should develop a new bus rapid transit plan for comparison with the current buses-and-trains plan.

"The plan that's currently out there hasn't explored those options yet," Cease said. He figures we'll settle someday on a mix that includes pieces of the old and new approaches.

David King of Triangle Transit grumbles that the alliance critique features "a fair amount of cherry-picking of data" intended to make bus rapid transit look especially good. But he's not opposed to further study. "There's nothing wrong with urging a more thoughtful look at enhanced bus service," King said. "Hear, hear. Let's get on with it."

The county commissioners can expect to hear encouraging words about bus rapid transit when they open their ears to the three outside experts coming to town Nov. 12. Each of the three told me he sees bus rapid transit as a smart option.

"I'm not one of those rail-at-any-costs people," said Cal Marsella, a consultant who served as general manager of the Denver Regional Transportation District from 1995 to 2009. "You try to provide as much service as you can, with the resources allocated."

Bus rapid transit probably does have a future here, on busy corridors such as New Bern Avenue, where there also is room to add new lanes reserved for buses. It's harder to see that fast buses could elbow their way ahead of rush-hour traffic along the clogged I-40 corridors east and west of Raleigh, with Duke University, RTP and N.C. State University already waiting for those rush-hour trains.

It's a pretty good bet that the Wake transit plan won't lead us to more transit any time soon. But we can certainly count on more planning.