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EXCLUSIVE REPORTS

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Study: Austin on right track

Researcher says commuter rail may add \$17.9B to region

[Giselle Greenwood](#)

Austin Business Journal Staff

A commuter rail system from Austin to San Antonio could pump about \$17.9 billion annually into the regional economy by 2030, a new report indicates.

The report, prepared by Austin-based [Texas Perspectives Inc.](#) and Orlando, Fla.-based PBS&J Corp., was commissioned by the Austin-San Antonio Intermunicipal Commuter Rail District. The district is studying the feasibility of a commuter rail line along the I-35 corridor. The district awarded PBS&J a management contract in November.

A proposal for a commuter rail line from Austin to Leander will appear on next month's election ballot.

The study looks at communities around the country that have commuter rail systems and compares them with communities without rail systems. The study also takes into account that the population in the Austin and San Antonio areas is expected to reach 4.63 million in 2030, a 50 percent jump from the current total.

According to the study, by 2030 a regional commuter rail system could:

- Generate \$20.4 billion in personal income.
- Create 310,000 jobs.
- Increase state tax revenue by \$1.02 billion.
- Boost local tax revenue by \$1.31 billion.

Jon Hockenyos, managing director of Texas Perspectives, says the study was done to check for "red flags."

"What we found is that commuter rail is a pretty good fit for this region," Hockenyos says. "There's no red flag there to suggest that this is something we should not look at."

Hockenyos stresses this isn't the final report, but is the first part of an in-depth study that also will examine how a regional rail system would be financed.

Sid Covington, vice chairman of the district's board, says: "It sounds like everything coming out of this study indicates a positive and significant economic impact in developing a commuter rail."

A big chunk of the economic impact relates to development surrounding rail stops. Hockenyos cites Leander as an example, estimating the city's property tax income would nearly double with a commuter rail system.

Jim Skaggs, a well-known transportation activist in Austin, raises serious doubts about whether a commuter rail stop in Leander would stir development.

"Rail should not be a driving force for development. It can be a big plus if it's cost-effective, but I haven't found any that are cost-effective," Skaggs says.

"The major factor for Leander will be U.S. Highway 183. That will stir development much more than a rail system."

Leander is developing a transit-oriented development on about 2,300 acres. Such a pedestrian-friendly developments typically consist of high-density mix of commercial and residential development, all centered on a rail or bus station. Gateway Planning Group, an Austin-based planning and urban design firm, has been hired by the city to undertake

planning for the site.

Although Leander is moving ahead with the transit-oriented project, a commuter rail line connecting Leander to downtown Austin is contingent upon voters approving a long-range transit plan drafted by Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority. The issue will go before voters Nov. 2.

Cap Metro's long-range plan includes commuter rail service from Georgetown to San Antonio. That line would run on freight tracks now used by the Union Pacific Railroad, and would require additional voter approval.

Mike Levy, publisher of Austin-based Texas Monthly magazine, is criticizing the concept of commuter rail, saying it's "an extremely stupid idea that just does not make any economic or practical sense."

"It's basically a single rail line that goes from nowhere to nowhere that will probably wind up costing well in excess of \$100,000,000 and affect less than one-half of one percent of all travel trips made Monday through Friday," Levy says in a widely distributed email.

Cap Metro is collaborating with other regional transportation agencies, including the Austin-San Antonio Intermunicipal Commuter Rail District, the Texas Department of Transportation and the Central Texas Regional Mobility Authority, to determine the future of commuter rail.

State Rep. Mike Krusee, R-Austin, chairman of the House Transportation Committee, says discussions with Union Pacific about commuter rail are moving forward.

"I think we'll be able to make significant progress by the end of the year," Krusee says.

Email GISELLE GREENWOOD at (ggreenwood@bizjournals.com).

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