

Interviews with Richmond Business Owners

July 18, 2006

An informal survey of concerns about the possible light rail line along Richmond

The Gulf Coast Institute recognized in 2003 that a Richmond Avenue transit line is the ideal option to connect the activity centers from Main Street and the universities to the Greenway and Uptown/Galleria areas. A Richmond Avenue light rail line would meet most, if not all, of the generally accepted conditions for urban transit success. A well-planned urban transit system that supports the livability and economy of urban life will have a crucial role in preserving highly valued green space around the region. Connecting Houston's key economic centers should be a top priority for METRO in considering the development of this light rail system.

Business and property owners typically realize greater benefits from urban light rail the closer in proximity they are to the nearest station. It is somewhat surprising that many Richmond area businesses and homeowners were represented as having already taken a position in opposition to a possible light rail line down Richmond Avenue. In keeping with its mission as an independent research organization, the Institute chose to explore this issue by conducting personal telephone interviews with area property owners.

We selected for interviews a varied sample of business owners listed in a letter from State Representative Martha Wong to METRO expressing opposition to one of the proposed options along Richmond Avenue. The eighteen interview respondents in the Richmond area represent a mix of business types: property management firms reflecting a mix of retail, restaurant, and residential (7); retail establishments (5); restaurants (3); service businesses (2); neighborhood association (1). Several key themes emerged from the interviews:

- General support for rail in the Houston region;
- Considerable concern about the impact of rail construction on individual businesses;
- A belief that commuter rail should precede further development of urban rail and that to do otherwise is poor planning; that rail along Richmond would not relieve rather create congestion on surface streets inside the 610

Loop on already congested arteries that would be further narrowed by the construction of rail;

- The perception that rail construction caused many business failures along Main Street and has had lasting negative impact on the character of the district;
- A lack of trust and confidence in METRO based upon METRO's perceived mismanagement of the Main Street project and their perceived lack of transparency regarding current plans;
- Widespread willingness to contribute ideas and recommendations to improve current and long range plans for urban transit;
- A broad desire to remain informed of the issues and new developments regarding the next phase of METRORail.

Only one respondent explicitly declared opposition to rail in general stating, "I'm not for it." The remaining 17 respondents indicated their support for rail. Eight offered an explicit statement of support for rail while the others made statements of preference for a particular location or supportive comments such as these:

- "Houston needs more mass transit."
- "We expect 6.5 million people by 2010, so we need more transit..."
- "Houston needs some type of mass transit for the right reasons"
- "We are supportive of upcoming rail anywhere..."
- "I'm for rail. I haven't said that in just that way before."

The Gulf Coast Institute is developing resources to help inform the civic discussion about the alignment of the proposed University rail line on the west side of Main Street. The Institute was perhaps the earliest to call for looking at Richmond as an alignment option for this line several years ago. At the present, we are still convinced it is the best option to achieve the strategic regional goal of linking our biggest activity centers with high-quality transit.

Additional resources can be found at:
<http://www.gulfcoastinstitute.org/>



Preferences on the Possibility of Light Rail Along Richmond

Prefer No Rail	1
No Preference	5
Prefer Richmond	2
Prefer Westpark	8
Prefer Other: Commuter Rail	6
Prefer Other: Buses/Trolleys	3

Some respondents made more than one selection

Considering that respondents were selected from those listed on the letter opposing the Richmond proposal, it was of interest to discover that two of the respondents actually favor rail along Richmond and five have no preference yet.

Those favoring Richmond said "I would go to the Galleria more if we had rail" and "it would be convenient for residents that go to the Med Center and downtown."

The five respondents who expressed no formal position on the proposed rail noted that they did not feel they had enough information yet to make an informed decision on any particular option, although one of these respondents had a tenant who has taken a position opposing rail along Richmond.

However, of those who favor some alternative to Richmond (10), the largest number favor rail along Westpark (8). Some argue that it should go down Westpark because that is where the people need it and it already has the right of way. Others argue that it will encourage high-density development on Westpark and bring a new tax base there. One respondent not in favor of Richmond did suggest, though, "if they elevated it, it might be more sensible."

However, several who supported an alternative to Richmond argued for commuter rail instead (6), with a few believing that this could be better achieved by linking up with the Westpark Park and Ride (4). After all, said one respondent, "[Richmond] is a distribution route, not a commuter route." Another respondent stated, "We need a vital downtown, so we need a plan to link people to the city center." Another asked,

"Why did they tear up existing rail on Westpark and Katy Freeway that could have been used?" Respondents suggested a variety of commuter options including I-45 to the The Woodlands, Westchase and Sugar Land, I-45 South, 290 to Grand Parkway, and the Katy Freeway.

Others noted that buses and trolleys were preferable on surface streets and that these could connect rail on Westpark to Richmond population centers (3).

Items that Concern Respondents About Light Rail Along Richmond

Business Access	10
Business Disruptions	9
Traffic Congestion	8
Land Acquisition	5
Neighborhood Character	4
Customer Differences	3
High-Density Residential	2
METRO's Management	11
Main Street Problems	11

Some respondents made more than one selection

The reasons cited by those opposing rail along Richmond varied. Many anticipate problems gaining access to their businesses from the street during and after construction (10). Their concern is not only customer access but also access by delivery vehicles. A majority would fully expect to experience business disruptions during the construction phase (9), which they anticipate will take two to three or more years judging from their observations of the Main Street project. A considerable number also envision heavy traffic congestion during and after construction due to narrowing of lanes to provide adequate easement for rail, a passing train every 7 minutes, and the probability that rail will prohibit the lights from being synchronized (8).

Several respondents raised concern about the need for private land acquisition from businesses to make room for rail (5). Some are concerned about possible changes in the neighborhood character that they would consider undesirable (4). For example,

they contend that if it is too difficult for customers to get to their businesses, they will choose to go elsewhere and not come back. As a result, they say, businesses will close, jobs will be lost, and the tax base will go down, causing lost revenue to the community. They foresee that local residents may be priced out of their homes by rising property values and will be forced to move elsewhere, resulting in the loss of the culture of creativity that is a distinct value the area brings to the city. They suspect that the marvelous urban mix and vitality that currently characterizes the area will be lost as well as the aesthetic value of Richmond Avenue and its trees.

A few respondents wonder whether the rail will attract a different population (3). They say the riders of rail may not match the profile of their current customers and may not be a good source of new customers. In fact, they worry that the area will become "seedy" as it attracts a new population. A couple of the respondents envision the development of more high-density housing as a result of the rail, although it was noted that this is likely to occur with or without rail, and in fact is happening now.

Costs and Benefits of Light Rail

There was apparent ambivalence among the respondents regarding the costs and benefits of the proposed rail line. For example, one respondent stated, "I'm not for it; there is not a benefit." Later he acknowledged, "I can see some long term benefits." Some larger businesses expressed cautious optimism saying that "we can survive the short term nuisances and costs" if it is only a couple of years. Even the reticent respondent admits, "There's been a lot of construction on Richmond and we're still here." But one respondent's statement sums it up for many: "We have a tremendous investment in our property there and when they say 'You'll benefit'...I say... 'Well, how?'" One respondent offered an answer, "Don't these businesses know that the closer you are to rail, the more market share you get?"

Small business owners, on the other hand, fear they would not survive construction to reap any possible benefits because as one respondent proclaimed, "All small businesses are undercapitalized! I started my business with \$30,000 and a

prayer." One respondent makes this point very clear: "Oh, I can see some long term benefits but what is it going to take, three years? By that time we could be out of business!" For many small business owners, the prospect of business losses is not just a financial risk assessment, it represents a life-changing event: "We built this business from our garage up. It's our past, our future, it's our livelihood." The following statement sums up the shared sentiment by many business owners, whether large or small: "Our concern is the impact on individual businesses...Recovery is a very slow process."

Key Issues

There was striking agreement among the respondents on two key issues: problems perceived with the Main Street METRORail (11) and concerns about METRO's management (11). When pressed to provide a rationale for their opposition to rail along Richmond, a few respondents had little to say about any potential negative impact upon their individual businesses and instead focused their opposition entirely upon these two concerns.

Perceived Problems on Main Street

Much of the concern being expressed by business owners on Richmond is based upon the perceived impact of the Main Street project, evidenced by the following expressions:

- "In the long run it will be nice, but in the short run what will happen is what happened on Main Street."
- "People are scared of Main Street because they expect to be hit by rail."
- "It has not improved mobility there because nobody wants to drive there now; traffic is simply diverted to other streets as people avoid those streets."
- "Mayor White's proposal to synchronize the traffic lights worked well until the rail prohibited it."
- "They will ruin Richmond like they did Main Street."
- "We're opposed to the way they execute rail."
- "METRORail has only 4 - 5 people at a time on it right now."
- "It's detrimental to business. Just look at Main Street. Some of those businesses never recovered. They got sacrificed. And

that knocks out our nominal tax base."

- "There are 35% vacancy signs on Main Street. Just go down Main Street at 10 mph and just look at the buildings for lease."
- "I believe it's a failure...that first line out of downtown to the Astrodome."
- "With the accidents, we are the laughing stock of rail cities. The design and implementation was poor."
- "Rail ruined the district. Oh yeah, they made it pretty to enhance it, but if it were New York or Chicago, it would be a good thing; but we're not New York or Chicago."
- "You can't try to make urban rail in a city that is spread out like a suburb."
- "People are so scared about what happened on Main Street. It's all about perception, and the perception was not managed well the first time."

Concerns about METRO Management

Believing that METRO is committed to moving ahead with a plan that they feel is different from what the voters approved in the 2003 referendum, these respondents take a principled position in opposition to any proposal other than what they think they voted for, and they are making the following assertions:

- "What the public voted for in 2003 was Westpark."
- "Just because they couldn't get federal funding for it on Westpark, they come back and stretch the definition of the Westpark Corridor to include Richmond."
- "They thought they could sneak this through in January without anybody noticing."
- "We are at a loss as to why we were not consulted."
- "There is so much distrust on this Richmond issue. Property owners feel like this was a bait and switch."
- "When they say they are seeking information, it doesn't mean anything anymore."
- "METRO has their agenda of what they want to do and paying lip service to any objections they are not willing to respond to."
- "If you ask any METRO employee, they will, if they are honest, tell you their recommendation is to put it down Richmond."

- "Real estate interests are actively sending out maps showing rail running down Richmond. They are acting in effect as brokers to private development interests and partnering with METRO in some capacity."
- "METRO will only respond if we over-react."
- "The Richmond Coalition will fight this in court with METRO if they try to put it on Richmond."
- "We have 375 businesses that have raised over \$1,000,000 to fight a lawsuit to take it back to a referendum. And we'll probably raise up to \$3,000,000, and you can quote me on that!"
- "The mayor doesn't want another referendum and neither do we!"

Citizen Hopes and Aspirations for the Future

Respondents demonstrated considerable interest in improving the quality of life in the city they call home and showed a sincere willingness to contribute their ideas and suggestions in an effort to create a more positive future for Houston.

Frequent comments by respondents indicated a strong interest in more comprehensive planning and strategic management of urban transportation in Houston. One respondent perceived that the current proposals were "putting the cart before the horse" by addressing surface street options prior to commuter options. Another queried, "Have you seen the plan? They don't have a plan." One respondent articulated this as follows: "We need a master plan; we have to start somewhere."

This same respondent added the comment, "The way we live has to change." Others echoed this sentiment as they pointed out that perhaps we "need to change people's thinking about the use of public transit." Drawing upon his experience in other urban areas that have been successful with public transit, one respondent suggested that it would be necessary to "increase density and make parking more difficult" to get people out of their cars. The practice of learning what works in other successful urban areas in order to strategically manage our city's progress toward urban transit was further encouraged by another respondent who stated, "I'd be curious to see what's

been done elsewhere.”

Respondents also called for improved leadership to support Houston's urban transit planning and management. One respondent pointed out that “The Houston Partnership told everybody the rail will make us a Tier 1 City. Well that's great but the common person needs to hear how he's going to get to work and whether the 'Mom and Pop' hamburger stand on the corner is going away because that's what makes it a neighborhood.” Considering the variety of problems observed on Main Street, one respondent recommends that leaders reassure the public: “METRO and the City need to state: 'It will be different this time.'” Reflecting upon the skepticism and mistrust of METRO many of the business owners feel, another respondent suggests, “Mayor White has credibility as a competent leader, and he needs to make sure the city performs.”

A few respondents were quite clear about what it would take to earn their continued support. For some it was METRO's performance while for others it was involvement. For example, one respondent clarified, “We are supportive of upcoming rail anywhere and we are officially for Richmond if done right.” Another said, “Let's put it this way, I am not all for it right now, but if it's coming, I want to be involved. Keep me posted. I'll come to meetings or whatever.” One respondent is clearly ready to contribute to the process: “We offered to get on a working group; we're waiting for METRO to signal us.”

While a few desire this higher level of involvement, nearly all of the respondents want to be kept informed as additional information becomes available (17). Many of the respondents were forming opinions based upon information they were gathering from a variety of sources, including meetings led by community activists, conversations they had with business owners on Main Street and Richmond, communications from METRO, public statements and news coverage, and their own experiences, observations, data gathering, and study of the issues. Often, respondents were not clear where they obtained their information. For example one respondent stated, “Information I have received indicates that METRO proposes a means to go from one end to the other without any access points along Richmond and that doesn't benefit the

businesses.” While some did not question the accuracy of the information they were operating with, others recognized that information they were receiving was insufficient, inaccurate, or inconsistent. This situation gave rise to the following comments:

- “We don't have enough information.”
- “We're just trying to understand what is going on.”
- “We are keeping an open mind and just want to get the facts.”
- “To be perfectly honest, there's still a lot of uncertainty and this is new to these people. Nothing they've been presented reassures them at all.”

In cases where the Gulf Coast Institute had confidence in the facts, any misconceptions or inaccuracies were addressed. Otherwise, the Institute has made a commitment to the respondents to keep them informed as we do obtain accurate information.

The responses to our interviews with Richmond area business owners are quite varied, particularly with regard to their preferences and concerns. However, considering the near unanimous concern expressed about METRO's management of the plans for the next phase of METROrail, one respondent's statement sums up the findings of the interviews quite well: “The jury is still out. The way they handle this will be pivotal.”