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## Getting around

As the 'Dillo is suspended, debate eminent on what's next for downtown transit

Austin Business Journal - by [Kate Harrington](#) ABJ Staff

The tagline from MTV's reality show "Real World" could apply to Austin's transportation debates: "Where people stop being polite and start being real."

Ask Austin residents about public transit around the central part of the city, and there's at least one common theme that everyone agrees on: Downtown Austin is becoming more congested, and something needs to be done to help ease the logjams.

That's where agreement ends, though.

The city of Austin thinks one part of the solution could be a downtown circulator, and has recently resurrected the idea — originally proposed by former Mayor Will Wynn in 2007 — with plans to issue a request for qualifications for preliminary engineering. A downtown public transit system could be part of a November 2010 transportation bond package, city officials said.

Opinions from Austinites who work or live downtown have come swiftly and been anything but muted, ranging from wholehearted support of a downtown public transportation system to dislike of the proposal. Should a bond election feature a rail package, it seems certain to draw vocal debate from both sides.

David Simmonds, founder of **Retail Solutions**, works on Congress Avenue. Simmonds, who has lived in Philadelphia and New York and used public transportation in both cities, said a downtown circulator sounds great in theory.

"But in actuality, do we have a critical mass of people to support such an investment?" Simmonds said. "The daytime employment and nighttime restaurant crowd is there, but it's not yet the full-swing live, work and play we're trying to achieve."

Simmonds said a downtown circulator would undoubtedly promote growth, but he's skeptical that the costs of such a system would be justified. It's not clear yet what the latest proposed circulator would cost. The original Central Austin rail concept that the Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization's transit working group considered in 2007 and 2008 entailed a roughly 15-mile route, and the cost in 2008 was estimated at \$650 million.

Rosalie Keszler, who is a consultant and president-elect of Commercial Real Estate Women Austin, said her initial reaction to a downtown system is that "it depends" on where the stops are, where the lines run and how it brings different parts of Austin together.

"The 'Dillo worked for a while, but then it changed, and a lot of people have said they don't like what it changed to," she said. "I have a car, my husband and son have cars. ... Once I'm in downtown, I usually stay there until it's time to get in my car and leave. I wouldn't utilize a downtown system."

Apparently, Keszler is not alone in her assessment that the 'Dillo was not effective. The Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority board decided on Aug. 31 to suspend the 'Dillo to help balance Capital Metro's budget, with Oct. 2 as the 'Dillo's last day of service. At one time, the 'Dillo had several color-coded routes, but they were consolidated into one north-south route along Congress Avenue and an east-west route along Fifth and Sixth streets. Also, the 'Dillo went from being free to costing 50 cents.

Brandon Janes, an attorney with Jackson Walker LLP who also works downtown, agreed that the 'Dillo was "a very unpleasant experience in general." But he thinks a downtown circulator would mesh with Austin's central core. Recalling meetings he attends regularly at the Capitol complex and the University of Texas campus, Janes said getting on a streetcar to travel from downtown to those points would be much easier than fighting traffic and hunting for parking.

Janes said he's also heard downtown professionals talk about living in what's called Uptown, an area between the Capitol and 19th Street. "There's some underdeveloped areas there that people are thinking may be a nice place to live," he said, adding that if a circulator could bring people downtown, more people might consider moving there.

Transportation experts are similarly divided. John Lewis, president of the **John Lewis Co.** and rail opponent, said less than 1 percent of transit trips per day are taken on public transit. He considers that clear evidence that a downtown rail system would be a waste of money.

Rail advocates often cite the success of rail in cities like Portland and San Diego. Lewis said the numbers in those cities are misleading in that the rail cars have riders only because bus lines were removed to make way for the rail. Investing in roads makes more sense, he said, because more people use roads than any other transportation system.



Nick Simonite

The 'Dillo had seen ridership decline before its service was suspended.

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“Around the country, they’re saying Austin and San Antonio will probably be the first two cities to come out of the recession,” Lewis said, adding that recovery will be slowed if traffic congestion doesn’t improve. “We have so much going for us. ... Our transportation problems can probably be impacted by better roads.”

Charlie Betts, executive director of the Downtown Austin Alliance, agrees with Lewis on one point: Economic recovery in Austin could be stifled by a do-nothing attitude regarding its transportation problems. Betts has faith that a downtown circulator, in addition to increased road capacity, is a step in the right direction, though.

Urban rail is one key to the economic vitality of downtown, which provides much of the city’s tax revenue, Betts said. Improving access to downtown will help the area grow and flourish, he said, and urban rail along with road improvements like the planned Manor Expressway will provide that.

“No matter what way you get to the central city, you’ll be able to move around without using your car to make a short drive, so it eases congestion of the central city,” Betts said. “It connects all the important dots — the Long Center and Palmer Auditorium with downtown, downtown with the state complex and with UT, and eventually go out to Mueller and Riverside Drive.”

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