

Joint RTAT/MAG Commuter Rail Stakeholder Group Meeting Meeting Summary

Date: March 25, 2009
Time: 1:00 – 4:00 pm
Location: Hilton Garden Inn
Participants: see sign-in sheets

The meeting began with a welcome by Vice-Mayor Tom Simplot, followed by a series of presentations on the status of ongoing studies related to transit and commuter rail in Arizona. Presenters included Jennifer Toth (ADOT) and Jose Bustamante (AECOM) on the Statewide Transit Framework Study, and Kevin Wallace (MAG) and Kammy Horne (URS) on the Commuter Rail corridor studies and System Study.

After the presentations, a panel was convened to respond to questions from the group in attendance. The panel included Kevin Wallace, MAG; Jennifer Toth; ADOT; Lonnie Blaydes, URS Study Team; Jose Bustamante, AECOM; Wulf Grote, METRO, and Carol Ketcherside, RPTA. [Audience members submitted written questions and comments to the panel.](#)

What is the timeline for completion of the studies? *Moderator question*

Kevin Wallace/MAG advised he intends to complete the following by year's end (approximately a 10 to 12 month process for each): MAG Commuter Rail System Study, Grand Avenue Commuter Rail Corridor Development Plan, and the UP Yuma West Commuter Rail Corridor Development Plan. Kevin Wallace added that the sequence at which the studies will be completed will be prioritized from a 'technical perspective'.

Can we get copies of this presentation on bqaz.org?

Kevin Wallace/MAG confirmed that the PowerPoint presentations made at the meeting will be posted on the BQAZ website.

A stakeholder sent an email prior to the meeting suggesting the creation of a high speed rail authority for the Phoenix region, and to look at high speed rail between Phoenix and Los Angeles. *Moderator question*

Kevin Wallace/MAG acknowledged that high speed rail between Phoenix and California is a good idea. Kevin Wallace added that high speed rail is being done in other countries, but unfortunately not common in the United States.

Kevin Wallace/MAG encouraged the planners within the state to not wait for high speed as the next solution, but to try to address both commuter rail and high speed if able. Kevin Wallace also mentioned that the discussion of implementation of commuter rail should not stop over the interest to implement high speed rail.

Jose Bustamante/AECOM mentioned it is important to recognize the purpose of transit modes, specifically how they can serve a community or region.

Jose Bustamante/AECOM stated that high speed rail in this region needs to drive the investment in passenger rail service for the Phoenix region. He also mentioned that “we should wait for commuter rail to develop.”

Costs of implementing rail upgrades- borne by ADOT or Railroads? What is incentive for railroads?

Lonnie Blaydes/URS Study Team mentioned that with respect to who pays the costs for passenger rail service, “it depends on the corridor that’s being served.” Lonnie Blaydes also mentioned that the private sector is not going to pay for improvements to their existing track – typically the public sector is responsible for these costs in turn for the use of right of way or existing track (currently being used for freight purposes).

Is there clear “buy-in” of the railroads (UP, BNSF) for shared use of their rail and rights of way by/with commuter rail?

Lonnie Blaydes/URS Study Team mentioned that BNSF usually has more “buy in” than UP for a passenger rail program. Lonnie Blaydes added that the private sector or rail companies have set criteria that must be met in order for a public/private partnership to exist. Criteria considered often includes: safety, capital costs, and especially no negative impact on freight traffic.

Will we need to build new rail lines or can we share the existing ones with freight traffic?

Lonnie Blaydes/URS Study Team mentioned that generally speaking, private rail companies will eventually bargain with the public sector. But the key element is funding to set implementation in motion.

Jose Bustamante/AECOM mentioned that “it’s a matter of expectations.” Jose Bustamante also mention that in recent conversation with UP and BNSF, relative to the BQAZ planning process, there seems to be a number of concerns with operating passenger service on the privately owned rail lines.

Kevin Wallace/MAG mentioned that in recent conversations with the rail companies, there was a strong interest on their part to work with MAG, but clearly, funding was necessary to make this a reality.

Lonnie Blaydes/URS Study Team concurred with the statements made about funding requirements. Lonnie indicated that money is necessary to change priorities by the private and public partners in a rail project.

An audience member asked aloud: what is the Governor’s position?

Jennifer Toth/ADOT mentioned that with respect to the State’s interest in passenger rail at this time, “the momentum is there, but we need to keep moving forward – the Governor does not have a specific position.”

Our state missed out on rail stimulus funding because we don’t have a plan. How can we position ourselves to take advantage of new funding thru the reauthorization (CLEAN-TEA)?

Lonnie Blaydes/URS Study Team mentioned that to get things started, the State or regional government can seek federal funding now, to create quiet zones – which are not a “throw away” cost.

Jennifer Toth/ADOT mentioned that there needs to be a “driving force or plan to take advantage of future opportunities.”

Does the branch line to Tempe compete with Metro Light Rail?

Wulf Grote/METRO Rail mentioned that during the light rail planning processes, the Tempe Branch (UP) was considered but not sought after as an extension of the light rail service because it did not fit within the larger planning/study area. He added that consideration of this branch was deferred to MAG or the State for passenger rail service consideration.

Need integrated rail system, but currently light rail ahead of MAG, MAG head of ADOT. How do we catch up without slowing down effort to prevent any potential mistakes?

Carol Ketcherside/RPTA indicated that bus service is very important – it plays an integral part of the entire transit system. Carol added that all transit modes need to be complimentary to one another.

Wulf Grote/METRO Rail mentioned that all 28 LRT stations are integrated into the Valley Metro bus service network.

Both Wulf Grote/METRO Rail and Carol Ketcherside/RPTA agreed that LRT ridership connections seem to be more so via bus than by car. Additionally, pedestrians are utilizing the LRT system in high numbers. Wulf Grote mentioned that the LRT park and rides are not overflowing as expected, resulting in not needing to use contingency parking plans to date.

Are the studies considering integration with sky harbor airport and eventually with Williams Gateway Airport as the Regions reliever airport?

Kevin Wallace/MAG mentioned that the use of the 44th Street LRT station as a connection to Sky Harbor is higher than expected.

Wulf Grote/METRO Rail mentioned that Sky Harbor is moving forward with their plans to implement the automated train system. Wulf Grote mentioned there is a potential link to commuter rail at the airport as well. On that point, Kevin

Wallace/MAG mentioned there is a strong desire in Tucson to implement a passenger rail link to the Tucson International Airport.

You mentioned Bike Roads as a desired amenity. Do you realize how helpful cycling and transit are to each other? Each extends the destination of the other. Racks on board and at stations is important. Planning safe pathways to/from stations is crucial.

With respect to bike racks, all on the panel agreed they are very popular on the recently opened LRT system. Lonnie Blaydes/URS Study Team mentioned that bike racks are being incorporated in many passenger rail technologies, including those in California and New Mexico. Carol Ketcherside/RPTA mentioned bike racks are very popular on the bus system as well.

How/Where did New Mexico get the money? (follow up to previous answer)

All panel members agreed that an integrated, funded, planning process is necessary for the successful implementation of commuter rail service in Phoenix.

Why not include Palo Verde in study? What planning steps for grade separations? What planning for transit corridors?

Kevin Wallace/MAG responded to a request to offer commuter rail service to Palo Verde by mentioning that it is not being considered at this time by the MAG study process as it is not within a practical service area.

On the subject of Palo Verde passenger rail service, Jennifer Toth/ADOT mentioned the Statewide Rail Framework planning process is considering all economic activity centers within its study process.

In the travel demand model will you consider removing a % or CCR traffic from overburdened corridors OR replacing expanded or new freeways like the 801?

Kevin Wallace/MAG mentioned that the MAG travel demand model will include a commuter rail function.

What is the most optimistic timeframe when Commuter Rail could be up and running? Moderator question

All panel members agreed that the “clock begins when funding is available.” On the subject of timing, Lonnie Blaydes/URS Study Team mentioned several examples, such as the New Mexico system took about three years. However Kevin Wallace/MAG stated this was an anomaly.

Additionally, Lonnie Blaydes/URS Study Team mentioned that the Salt Lake City system took about three years to implement, once funding to plan and operate was available. Lonnie Blaydes added that public support absolutely has to be in place to create a successful implementation of passenger rail service.

Wulf Grote/METRO Rail mentioned that when federal money is involved and additional requirements are in place, a slower implementation process occurs.

Lonnie Blaydes/URS Study Team recommended that to ensure a more rapid implementation, the system planning process should utilize existing freight rail specs. – especially when a shared use is in place.

What assumptions are being used re locations of jobs or employment centers. All growth communities want local jobs to lessen amount of commuting. Potential funding sources and structures (e.g. Page 3)

A question was raised concerning MAG's identification of economic development and employment centers or nodes along commuter rail corridors under consideration. Kevin Wallace/MAG advised that land use development data, among other planning documents, are being used.

Of course this is great that the MAG is moving forward in this direction, but why is the focus on outer corridor instead of focusing on an inner corridor and enhancing the LRT system and benefiting the MAG region?

Kevin Wallace/MAG mentioned that he sees commuter rail planning focusing on an entire system – not necessarily by specific corridors. All corridors under consideration are being reviewed as part of a larger system.

Is it too late to bring in other stakeholders to this group?

Kevin Wallace/MAG mentioned that it is not too late- bringing in new stakeholders is encouraged.

Other Questions not included in draft notes:

Can we connect the Grand Ave and Yuma West lines in Phoenix? One station there for both?