

October 2020 Column

By Commissioner Gerald Daugherty

### The City's Prop A Would be a Boondoggle

How many times do I have to point out that spending billions of dollars on the latest proposal for a rail transit system in Austin would be wasted money? I spoke up in May of 2018 and again in November of 2019. My words then still apply now. I hope this community is not duped into supporting a transit plan that will needlessly cost billions of dollars. Rail makes no sense in Austin because rail transit won't make any significant dent in our transportation load. It's not a realistic, cost-effective way to mitigate congestion, even any future projected congestion.

If Proposition A on this November's election ballot is approved by City of Austin voters it would be one of the biggest boondoggles in the City's history, would greatly increase City property taxes in perpetuity, and would lead to even more property tax increases in the future, since this is just the first phase of the Project Connect plan part of Prop A. The 8.75 cent increase won't cover operating costs, so they'll have to come back to taxpayers several times for more money, increasing your property taxes even more. And who really believes that federal money will pay for even a portion of this?

One big thing people must understand is that Prop A IS NOT a bond election like Prop B is. The huge tax increases of Prop A will not go away after a few years, they will go on forever. Another thing to question is why the ads for Prop A push this as a "comprehensive" transit plan, when it's really a rail plan, because 87% (\$6.17 billion) of the costs come from just the 3 rail lines and the transit tunnel. And if you look closely, the wording of Prop A mentions "fixed rail" only twice in its' voluminous paragraph, with the rest being just all kinds of feel good items.

There are many reasons why Proposition A is a bad idea that voters must resoundingly reject. For starters, it makes no sense to spend \$6.17 billion on rail, that maybe barely 1% of commuters would use. And most of those wouldn't be new commuters because it would just switch present bus riders to train riders. CapMetro should run an efficient & flexible bus system for transit users, not a costly fixed route system that wouldn't be used by over 99% of area commuters. It's just a repeat of another rail plan that doesn't make any sense.

Another thing most people probably don't realize is that CapMetro has taken over \$4 billion from taxpayers in its' 35-year existence. Despite all that money & all their different plans, their system has continually been used by only about 3%-4% of commuters. And, since 1990 to 2019, their ridership has stayed relatively flat, while our population has more than doubled. So, even after spending billions of dollars, there's been no real increase in ridership. History shows that most people aren't interested in using public transportation.

Even before the pandemic & its' effect on bus ridership (which has plummeted), there's another way commuting has changed. It's called teleworking. Census figures show that 5% of our workers

teleworked back in 2006, and 8% did so in 2016. Notice how those numbers are greater than public transit users. As for present times, a recent survey of Central Texas workers found that even after COVID is no longer a threat 25% expect to telework at least 4 days a week, and 65% expect to telework some of the time. In other words, traffic congestion will be affected much more by work schedules & teleworking- which costs the public nothing. Telework alone will guarantee this much more than public transit ridership.

Another huge point to bring up is that, with all the constant talk by the City about the lack of affordability in Austin, why would they call for this huge tax increase in the middle of the worst economic time we've experienced in our lifetime? This would reduce people's spending power even more, especially since many have lost their jobs, many businesses are barely getting by, commercial real estate is being affected, etc. And businesses along the planned rail corridors will be annihilated during the building phase. As a business partner in several area restaurants, the only thing Prop A would do for those businesses is to increase operating costs above our already thin margins. And I'm sure most all businesses in Austin would say the same thing.

Bottom line, we all know that public transit is needed for travel in a metropolitan area, which is why the voters (with my support) created CapMetro in 1985. Instead of letting them foist costly rail on us, this City needs to demand that CapMetro keep its' eye on the ball and run the most cost effective, efficient, and flexible bus system possible. A full penny sales tax is more than enough money for CapMetro to make this happen, if they really wanted to fulfill their mission.