

[Email this article](#)
[Print this article](#)
Most emailed pages

[Click to send](#)
Choose File Print or Ctrl P or Apple P
[Today](#) | [This Week](#)

Light rail may come early to West Valley

Metro may move up timetable by 4 years

Sean Holstege

The Arizona Republic
Nov. 30, 2006 12:00 AM

Efforts are gathering steam to send light rail out to traffic-weary suburban commuters four years early.

Today, the Metro board will take steps that would allow an 11-mile extension west along Interstate 10 to open as early as 2015. It's a goal shared by Phoenix City Hall and many West Valley commuters.

The extension will not solve all the freeway's traffic congestion, partly because light rail would stop just east of Loop 101 and development west of there continues at a rapid pace.

But regional officials say it will ease the woes. Even a tiny reduction in cars on a freeway can greatly lessen congestion, traffic engineers say. Plus, I-10 rail plans are moving ahead in tandem with plans to widen the freeway.

The efforts represent the Valley's sometimes frantic attempts to keep up with growth as far-flung development outpaces the area's ability to build a transportation system.

The Metro board today is expected to seek federal study money for the first time and agree to launch that study in January rather than 2011.

That is possible because Phoenix has offered to jump-start the study with as much as \$6 million in upfront money.

Among the options being examined: using buses or some kind of rail, and running transit down the I-10 median, along the freeway or through a nearby neighborhood.

"We'd like to have the I-10 extension opened today," said Ed Zuercher, chief of staff for Phoenix Mayor Phil Gordon. "We have the opportunity, because of our local tax (revenue), to push this one up."

The I-10 route isn't scheduled to open until 2019, after extensions open in Tempe, Mesa, north Phoenix toward Metrocenter mall and into downtown Glendale.

Metro officials insist they don't want to change that voter-mandated sequence, which would take a majority vote of all the cities in the region.

But the I-10 line is gaining prominence in city halls for three reasons: rapidly increasing traffic, state plans to widen the interstate and the opening of University of Phoenix Stadium and Westgate Center in Glendale.

Request for \$13 million

In its request, Metro will ask the federal government for \$13 million to study all extensions due to open before 2020 except one. Not listed was the proposed downtown Glendale line. Glendale's mayor and business leaders have said they would prefer that the rail go to Westgate Center.

Every year, I-10 traffic congestion worsens. In 2005, about 174,000 cars traveled I-10 past 83rd Avenue, according to the Maricopa Association of Governments. By 2009, the number will grow to 208,000. Traffic there will have increased 86 percent in a little more than a decade, the group says.

The three most popular destinations for I-10 commuters from west of Loop 101 are downtown Phoenix, uptown along Central Avenue and Sky Harbor International Airport, data from the county group shows. All destinations will be served by the light-rail system due to open in late 2008.

Trains in the freeway would attract commuters because stations would be spaced every two miles, allowing faster service than is possible on the denser 20-mile starter line.

Meanwhile, the Arizona Department of Transportation is planning to expand the clogged freeway and will launch its own study next summer. The state reserved 50 feet in the median, enough for light rail. There is also reserved easement on the side of the interstate.

Between the I-10 and I-17 juncture and Loop 101, there is room for an extra lane and light rail, in addition to the existing HOV lane. Between Loops 101 and 303, there is room, money and current plans for adding two lanes and extending the HOV lane west.

Without disrupting those plans, light rail could extend farther west only if tracks take a flyover bridge to the side.

West of Loop 303, there are plans for only one extra freeway lane.

Avondale officials said the city is interested in anything that relieves I-10 congestion, including an unplanned rail extension beyond Loop 101.

The Maricopa Association of Governments says light rail would lose its effectiveness if it went too much farther, adding commuter rail on freight tracks is a

better option for suburbs such as Buckeye.

Metro's study also is being prompted by ADOT's freeway widening plans.

"We have an opportunity to coordinate with ADOT on a project they need and we need," Metro Project Development Director Wulf Grote said.

A visit to Denver

Metro, ADOT and MAG recently visited Denver to see how its transit agency coordinated with Colorado's Department of Transportation to build the T-REX extension.

The \$1.7 billion combo freeway expansion and new light-rail line opened earlier this month, nearly two years ahead of schedule. The joint effort saved \$300 million.

Many of the stations in Denver were built to the side of the freeway. Grote's team recently concluded that the center of I-10 would work better.

But real answers won't be known until after the two-year study. It will tell planners the best options for how and where to put transit.

Historically, such studies tend to reinforce the prevailing wisdom and conclude that connecting to light rail with a different form of transit creates an undesirable transfer.

Reach the reporter at sean.holstege@arizonarepublic.com or (602) 444-8334.

Email this article

Print this article

Most emailed pages

Click to send

Choose File Print or Ctrl P or Apple P

Today | This Week