

Metro explores ways to extend light rail into Glendale

I-10 extension also presents an early, costly challenge

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Light rail's westward ambitions are expected to take a significant step forward next week when Metro's board votes on whether to approve the first study of trains to Glendale's sports complex.

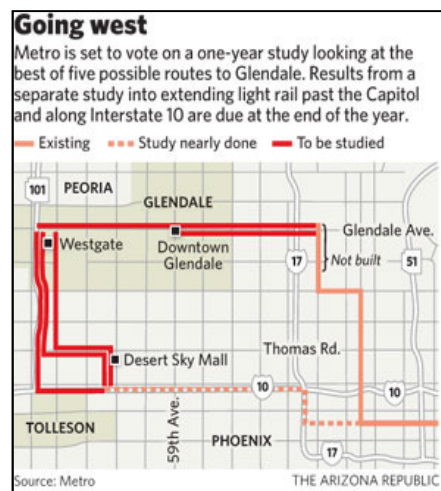
The study, recommended last week by a committee, would evaluate five transit options for Glendale, four of which would end up at the sports-and-retail complex at University of Phoenix Stadium at the Westgate City Center.

Three options are contingent on trains heading west from downtown Phoenix, past the state Capitol and continuing along Interstate 10.

Metro faces a barrier in making the westward line from downtown Phoenix possible: The board is being asked to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars to adjust part of the CityScape project in downtown Phoenix, which is at a key future rail connection, so eastbound trains could curve north through the area. The board would spend that money before knowing if a route along I-10 is viable.

The unforeseen expense and early commitment would add pressure to build along I-10. That bodes well for Glendale's preference for a Westgate destination and lowers the profile of a voter-approved route that goes to downtown Glendale. Glendale officials have shifted their support for that extension along Glendale Avenue to one that parallels I-10.

The proposed studies come as sharp drops in sales-tax revenues are forcing Metro to rethink the entire 57-mile system approved when voters passed Proposition 400 five years ago. Construction on an extension north from Montebello and 19th avenues is on hold indefinitely. Planning for all the extensions have been pushed back a year or two, meaning a Paradise Valley Mall spur cannot happen without a renewal of the Prop. 400 sales tax.



In the East Valley, Mesa has approved plans to extend rail to its downtown, and the region is seeking federal funds to build it. A south Tempe spur has taken a back seat, and planners are looking at a rapid-bus option as more realistic.

West Valley transit riders, bereft of rail investments, will have something to turn to with the launch of a new study.

Which way to Glendale?

Metro's board of directors will be asked to award an \$878,000 contract to evaluate five options for extending light rail or rapid buses into Glendale.

Options include:

- Going to downtown Glendale along Glendale Avenue from a northern extension of the 20-mile starter line. This is the voter-approved option.
- Continuing through downtown along Glendale Avenue as far as Westgate.
- Going to Westgate via I-10 and Loop 101.
- Going to Westgate via I-10, Desert Sky Mall and city streets.
- Following the same route to Desert Sky Mall but continuing to Westgate along Loop 101.

For its money, Metro will learn in about a year estimates of early ridership and cost for each option and which stands the best chance of attracting federal investment. A final recommendation is still about three years away, Metro Planning Director Wulf Grote said.

In any case, Glendale relies on Phoenix's decisions because neither the I-10 nor the Glendale Avenue routes can be built without adding track in Phoenix.

"Phoenix holds the cards, and Glendale receives the cards," Glendale Transportation Director Jamsheed Mehta said.

He voted for the study last week as Glendale's representative to the Metro panel and said it's a good thing to get an early jump on the study. He thinks any final route will be chosen on its merits, based on the findings of the studies.

Still, recent actions lend more momentum to the I-10 route.

Metro this year halted construction indefinitely on its extension along 19th Avenue, a necessary project for the Glendale Avenue route.

Also, Metro may be more inclined to build the I-10 track after committing money to the track interchange at Central Avenue and Jefferson Street, a location that Metro officials described as critical.

Some early decisions are becoming clear. A westward branch would go past the Capitol either on Adams or Jefferson streets, but not Washington Street west of Seventh Avenue.

Issue at CityScape

As ideas emerge for extending rail west, the intersection of Central Avenue and Jefferson Street is emerging as key to Metro's long-term future.

Tracks heading east into downtown from the Capitol would curve north across CityScape, a 1.8 million-square-foot office, condo and hotel project, and go up Central.

To accommodate the tracks, CityScape needs to be fortified so its underground spaces can support fully loaded trains above. But CityScape is nearing completion, which means Metro's board must vote now on whether to spend unbudgeted money - anywhere from \$300,000 to \$2 million - on the work.

One reason Metro wants to curve the tracks north through the project is to avoid forcing passengers to transfer between that line and the existing line.

"Our models are showing two-thirds of the people coming from the west side want to go north up Central," Grote said. His team studied routes up numerous combinations of side streets, but turning up Central was deemed the least flawed.

Officials in the Phoenix City Manager's Office said plans for CityScape took shape five years ago, before the future track alignment was known.

A Metro committee last week gave Rick Simonetta, Metro chief executive, authority to negotiate a price for the extra work directly with RED Development, the CityScape contractor, and spend regional transit money to get it done. All this activity comes at least two months before the expected completion of a study to determine if a western track is worth doing, though it would be a surprise if the study did not recommend the rail extension.

<http://www.azcentral.com/news/traffic/lightrail/articles/2009/10/13/20091013railwest1013.html>