

Light-rail extension planned for 19th Ave. delayed until 2014

Phoenix can't afford to open 3-mile leg yet

by **Sean Holstege** - Jun. 25, 2009 12:00 AM
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Phoenix officials have put the brakes on the new light-rail system's first expansion, saying it cannot afford to build tracks or operate trains along another 3 miles of 19th Avenue.

The delay of at least 16 months means the soonest the light-rail extension can open is 2014, about six years after the starter line opened.

Deputy City Manager Ed Zuercher said he decided against asking the Phoenix City Council to award a construction contract on the Northwest Extension because local sales-tax receipts, the sole funding source, have nose-dived in the past three months.

Unlike other extensions, the projected \$273 million project is being paid for entirely by local sales taxes because the city wanted to avoid a complicated process required to tap federal funds.

Work was to have begun in the spring and was pushed back to June. Now, Zuercher said, the soonest the city will revisit a construction contract for the extension will be late 2010. Phoenix will use the time to acquire property along 19th Avenue.

The delay could be prolonged if economic conditions continue to deteriorate, which could happen because the decline in tax revenue is accelerating.

It's now possible that the first addition to the Metro system could be an automated people-mover connecting the 44th Street Station to Sky Harbor International Airport. The first leg of the \$1.1 billion Sky Train project is scheduled to carry its first passengers in 2013.

Rail network slowing

Phoenix's action is the latest sign that the timing and details of the 57-mile, light-rail network approved by voters remain in flux.

Last month, regional transportation groups agreed to push most light-rail projects back a year or two. One project, a 12-mile track toward Paradise Valley Mall, was pushed back to 2030, meaning it cannot happen unless voters renew the tax or rail planners find another source of cash. The tax expires in 2025.

A proposed south Tempe rail spur is running into technical and financial hurdles. Although a recommendation isn't due on the Rural Road alignment until the end of the year, planners are leaning toward a rapid bus, like Mesa's LINK line, as more feasible than light rail.

Last week, the Scottsdale City Council voted to quit the Valley Metro board, the strongest signal yet that light rail is a long shot in that community.

In the West Valley, a study of two possible routes to Glendale is due to begin by the end of summer, but both rely on Phoenix completing the track within its city limits. One route, a voter-backed plan to go to downtown Glendale, would branch out from the now-delayed Northwest Extension. The other would extend west through Phoenix in the median of Interstate 10, then run along Loop 101 to the Westgate Center in Glendale.

Construction on a Glendale extension isn't scheduled to begin until 2016, so the project won't necessarily be set back by Phoenix's delay.

"We don't believe (the Northwest Extension) will be completely out of the plan, but it's a matter of how long before Phoenix can afford it," said Jamsheed Mehta, Glendale's transportation director.

Troubled history

The Northwest Extension has had a difficult birthing.

Initially, tracks were envisioned crossing Interstate 17 and ending at Metrocenter mall. When it hired planning consultants, Metro decided it made more sense to stop at a corporate park on the eastern side of the freeway.

Two years later in March 2007, Phoenix leaders pared that project, shortening the track by nearly 2 miles and eliminating two proposed stations.

Phoenix and Metro decided to use only local taxes to build the extension because construction would go faster without having to meet regulations tied to federal funding. About three-quarters of the money comes from a Phoenix sales tax approved in 2000; the rest comes from Prop. 400, a countywide sales tax passed in 2004.

By avoiding the federal bureaucracy, Phoenix and Metro also now have made it unlikely that they could tap federal stimulus money.

Phoenix, Glendale, regional and Metro officials called the delay regrettable but prudent.

"This is disappointing news, but not a surprise given the state of the economy. Although difficult, it's the fiscally responsible thing to do," Metro Chief Executive Officer Rick Simonetta wrote in an e-mail to employees earlier this month.

"The overwhelming feeling is disappointment," Zuercher said, explaining that he made the decision because contractors were ready to begin staging work. "We've experienced the high of opening day. We've seen the growing ridership. We've heard the positive comments about what light rail is doing for Phoenix, but the economic reality is driving everything now."

The Northwest Extension took shape when planners made economic forecasts at the peak of the local economy. In the past three months alone, Phoenix has lowered its projections on transit-tax revenue by \$60 million.

Metro said the changes do not break faith with Valley voters.

"Our goals are still the same: We will still use the regional transit plan as a guide to plan extensions," Metro spokeswoman Hillary Foose said. "This is a result of the economic times, but people are still going to get what they voted for."

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Light-rail extension schedule pushed back

The recession will wipe out hundreds of millions of dollars in sales-tax revenue for light-rail extensions. The region has pushed back schedules on all new lines.

