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# Project Connect Makes A Lot Of Promises. Equity Is One Of Them.

By [SAMUEL KING | KUT \(/PEOPLE/SAMUEL-KING-KUT\)](#) • JUN 10, 2020

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(//www.kut.org/sites/kut/files/styles/x\_large/public/202006/Norwood.jpg)

*Some of the work in historically underserved areas has already begun, such as the Norwood Transit Center, which opened late last year in Northeast Austin.*

GABRIEL C. PÉREZ / KUT

The Capital Metro Board and Austin City Council are expected to vote Wednesday on a preferred plan for Project Connect, the proposal to expand the region's transit system.

Leaders have been touting Project Connect’s benefits, such as reducing congestion and creating jobs. But they’re also promising another benefit that may be harder to measure: equity for historically underserved groups.



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6:10

*KUT's Samuel King reports*

The plan proposes adding three new light rail train lines as well as new bus routes and park-and-ride centers. The vote Wednesday determines how the transit expansion would look, and in a couple months, leaders will finalize a financial plan that will go before voters in November.

Throughout May, Capital Metro held a series of virtual public meetings that outlined plans for the transit projects and proposals to pay for them. Equity was a key theme throughout the discussions.

“We know as a city and as a region we're going to go from 2 to 4 million people. We have to invest in our infrastructure to manage that,” said Capital Metro President and CEO Randy Clarke during the May 29 meeting. “I think it's fair to say that we haven't done that historically. That's where we are today. And some of our infrastructure of the past has actually divided our community.”

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## Closing Divides

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I-35 has served as a reminder of Austin's racial and socioeconomic divisions. And public transit has historically illustrated those divides. For instance, the two current MetroRapid limited-stop bus lines both mostly run west of I-35. The region's commuter train service, the Red Line, only has two stops east of the interstate.

"It is possible for us to work on equity and make sure that we connect the entire city and still grow our transit opportunities around the entire city," said Travis County Commissioner and Capital Metro Board Member Jeff Travillion. "And it's important that we do look at those historically underserved areas as we do so."

Travillion said some of the work has already begun, pointing to the new Norwood Transit Center, which opened late last year in Northeast Austin.

"You have six bus routes coming out of there that leave every 15 minutes in an area that had been considered a transit desert," he said.

Project Connect promises to close some divides by adding upgraded services in East Austin and other underserved parts of the region. Some of the new services include more MetroRapid lines and neighborhood circulators similar to the on-demand Pickup service already in place in parts of East Austin and Manor.

Project Connect also proposes two flagship light rail lines, the Orange and Blue. A third, the Gold Line, which would run from downtown to Austin Community College's Highland Campus, would eventually become a light rail line.

“East Side MetroRapid routes that connect to East Austin and light rail lines have to inherently improve access to schools and hospitals and jobs and services and stores,” she said during a meeting on May 18. “And so all of this is directly connected. So I think this is inherently a part of a larger conversation and action, frankly, that we have to take as a city.”

But there's some skepticism that Project Connect won't live up to its promises.

Activist Zenobia Joseph is a frequent presence at Capital Metro meetings. She told the board last month they have not done enough to ensure equity, especially in regard to African-Americans forced out of the city's core because of escalating housing costs.

She pointed to 2018's Cap Remap (<https://www.kut.org/post/cap-metro-rolls-out-sweeping-changes-austins-bus-system>) as an example. The plan rerouted several bus lines across the city, adding more high-frequency service. But that meant some local bus service was either lost or at least became more inconvenient for some people.

“I know you have all the buzzwords that the Federal Transit Administration will look at on paper,” Joseph said. “Mr. Chairman, I would just ask you to remember that Jan. 28, 2019, you acknowledged that in the Eastern Crescent, that there were people who were disadvantaged by Cap Remap. And you have an opportunity to just do the right thing.”

Board Chair Wade Cooper acknowledged during that meeting that some people in East Austin were inconvenienced by Cap Remap, but he also said the plan actually increased access to high-frequency bus service to minority and low-income communities.

Cap Metro leaders point out that studies showed the remap met federal civil rights mandates (<https://capmetroblog.com/2018/05/30/cap-remap-explainer-faq-edition/>) and did not have a disproportionate impact on minority communities.

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## Investing In Transit Equity

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This time around, equity is included in the resolution leaders will vote on Wednesday. It calls investment in transit equity “the most profound action we at Capital Metro can take to correct historical inequities.” Garza tied Project Connect to the recent protests against police violence, and the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on minority communities.

“We can't ignore some of the things happening right now in the news of racial injustice. And so people are asking, ‘How can I help? What can I do? How do we change the system?’ We invest in things that help our brown and black community and our communities that are struggling,” she said during a meeting on May 29. “And public transit really provides access and help to those communities.”

Austin City Council also passed a resolution in April, originally sponsored by Council Member and Capital Metro Board Member Ann Kitchen, that directed the City Manager to ensure transit improvements under Project Connect don't lead to more gentrification and displacement.

**Got a tip? Email Samuel King at [samuel@kut.org](mailto:samuel@kut.org) (<mailto:samuel@kut.org>). Follow him @SamuelKingNews (<https://twitter.com/SamuelKingNews>).**

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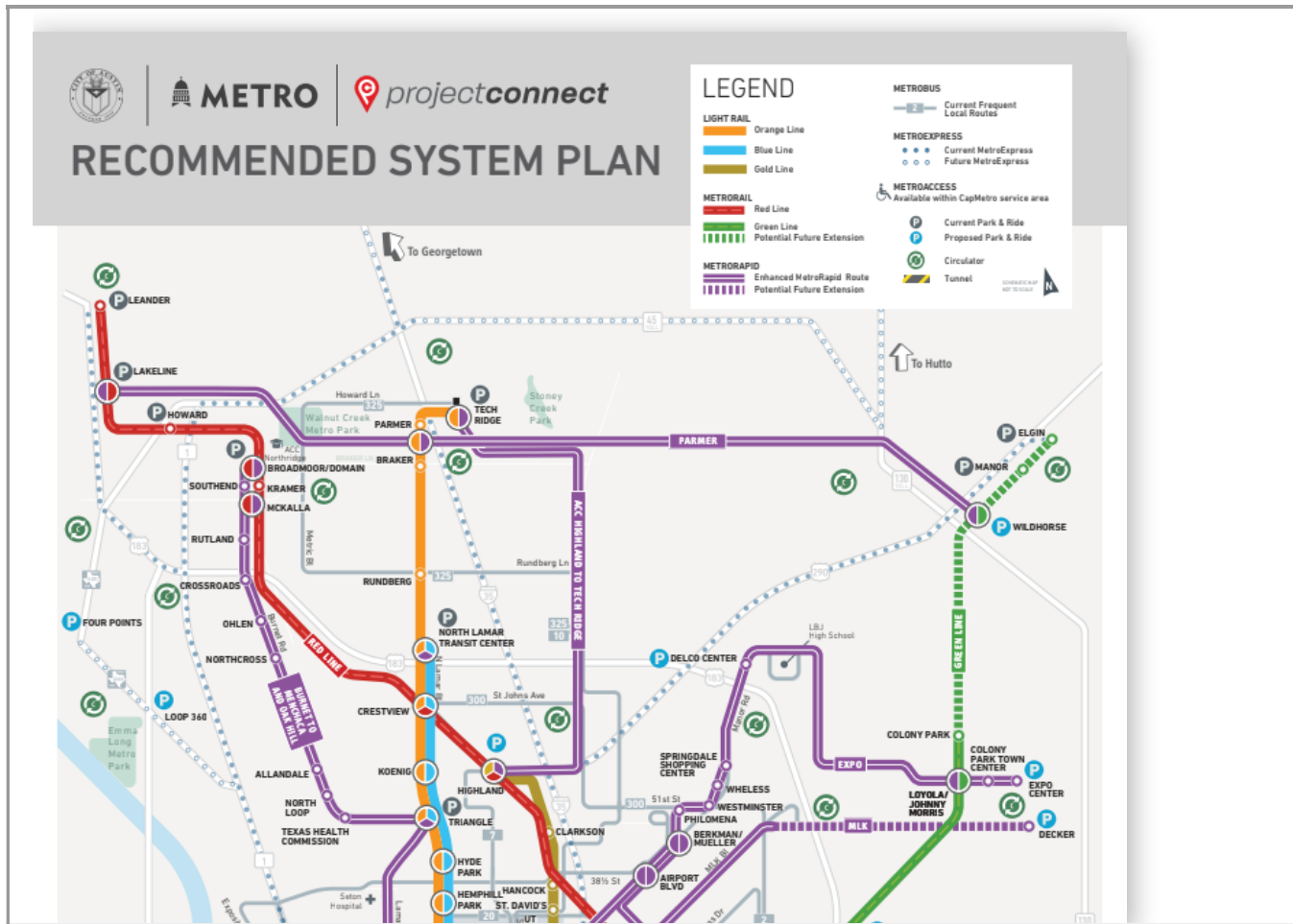
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Austin Mayor Pro Tem Delia Garza serves on the Capital Metro board. Del Valle, which is part of her council district, is a community that has asked for better transit service for years. She said she's grateful that the new neighborhood circulators and other additional services in the plan would provide connections to the proposed Blue Line, which runs between the airport and downtown. Garza also represents the Pleasant Valley neighborhood in Southeast Austin.

"Pleasant Valley would get a MetroRapid bus line, which is more frequent service every 10 to 15 minutes," Garza said. "And that would connect them to the Blue Line to get them into downtown or to the airport. We have a lot of workers that work at the airport. That would allow them access to that Blue Line to get to the airport and to get back home."

A new commuter rail line, the Green Line, would run from Downtown out to Colony Park and eventually Manor and Elgin.

Analysis of the proposed routes by Capital Metro shows that the minority population in station areas along the Blue Line is 59%, with 26% of the population in poverty. Along the Orange Line, which will mostly run west of I-35, the minority population is 48% and the population in poverty is 23%. As for the MetroRapid expansion, the minority population is 54% in station areas, with 20% of the population in poverty.

District 1 Council Member Natasha Harper-Madison says the improved service could go a long way toward closing gaps in access to jobs and needed services.