

Three Large U.S. Cities Will Vote on Rapid Transit Issues

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A PART OF L.A.'S FUTURE? — A modern commuter-type rail car similar to those that would be operated on the proposed rapid transit

system is exhibited at Century City, one of the proposed system's station stops. Voters on Nov. 5 will decide the fate of the transit plan. Times photo by Frank Q. Brown

Three Large U.S. Cities Will Vote on Rapid Transit Issues

Plans for New Systems to Solve Traffic Problems and Reshape Areas Face Tests in L.A., Atlanta, Washington

BY RAY HEBERT
Times Urban Affairs Editor

New rapid transit systems to help solve traffic problems and reshape large metropolitan regions are facing a critical test.

Their future could hinge next Tuesday on decisions by the people who will use them—and those who won't—in three widely scattered sections of the nation.

Metropolitan region voters in Los Angeles, Atlanta and Washington will go to the polls Nov. 5 to decide whether they want to follow the recent lead of Toronto, Montreal, San Francisco and other "rapid transit cities."

In addition, New Jersey will be voting on a proposed statewide bond issue to improve its transportation facilities. Part of the funds would be earmarked for better railroad commuter service to mid-Manhattan.

The issues, here and in other cities, are alike in many ways. Each involves a basic question:

Are the benefits in traffic relief, time savings, land usage and other factors worth the additional tax burden?

Standard Rail Networks

Each system would be a standard rail network—not a monorail. Each would have high-speed commuter-type trains with the lines in subways, at ground level and on elevated structures.

But there the similarity ends.

The Los Angeles plan involves the largest single bond proposition ever put to any group of voters.

Its approval would earmark funds—to be provided solely by metropolitan area taxpayers—for an 89-mile rail and expanded bus network to supplement the region's overworked freeway system.

Rapid transit planners have never regarded it as a replacement for the freeway system.

In Washington, a tangled financing program has put that region's proposed 97-mile rail system in competition with a developing freeway network for funds.

By comparison, the issue in Atlanta's 40-mile metropolitan area system is much more clear-cut.

Atlanta transit officials contend it would have a far greater impact on Atlanta's future than any recent planning decision.

While all three proposed systems are similar in concept, there is a striking difference in the financing approach here and the tack being taken in Washington and Atlanta.

Metropolitan voters are being asked to assume the Los Angeles project's full construction cost with a one-half cent increase in the state sales tax.

But local contributions, if they are approved, would make up only part of the costs of the Washington and Atlanta area systems.

Congress will be asked to supply more than \$1.3 billion of the \$2.52 billion price tag for the Washington region's commuter network.

And, in the Atlanta area, about half the system's total cost of \$750 million will be sought from state and federal governments.

All three proposals, from a voter standpoint, are questionable eight days before the election, although the Washington and Atlanta plans appear more likely to pass than the Los Angeles proposition.

Here a 60% majority is required for passage. A simple majority will put the other two over.

The feeling seems to be that the interest in urban rapid transit facilities—dormant for many years but newly awakened in Toronto, Montreal and San Francisco—could suffer a damaging blow if voters turn down the Nov. 5 propositions.

Seattle voters, bombarded by many of the same arguments being heard here, in Washington and in

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TRANSIT

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Atlanta, rejected a proposed \$385 million bond issue earlier this year for a rapid transit system to serve the metropolitan region.

Last November, however, New York state voters approved a \$2.5 billion borrowing plan to modernize rapid transit, highway and other transportation facilities.

At the time, the New York financing plan was the largest proposal ever presented to any electorate in dollar terms. The current Los Angeles proposal exceeds it by several million dollars.

Before the New York vote, rapid transit's last major test was in 1962 when San Francisco Bay area voters narrowly approved \$792 million for a 75-mile, three-county rail system.

The project is now under construction, but has run into serious financing problems.

In any appraisal of the three plans to be voted on next month, the possible failure of the Los Angeles proposal should not be taken as a true gauge of rapid transit's acceptability.

Central Regions

Nor should the plan's defeat, if that is the outcome, suggest a trend away from fixed rail systems as an efficient transporter of vast numbers of commuters into highly centralized business regions.

With most commuters here accustomed to driving their own automobiles, the situation is far different than it is in either the Washington or Atlanta metropolitan regions.

In Washington and Atlanta, less reliance is placed on cars. Commuters, converging in greater relative numbers on more intensely used central areas, place more stress on public transportation.

From this standpoint a loss at the polls Nov. 5 could be a serious setback for rapid transit.

Actually Congress and voters in outlying areas will determine the future of the Washington region's rapid transit plan.

Under the proposal developed by the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority, voters in three suburban counties—two in Virginia and one in Maryland—and two Virginia cities will be balloting on bond proposals totaling \$214 million.

Another contribution will come from Montgomery County, Md., which was authorized by the Legislature earlier this year to sell \$116 million in transit bonds. And, Alexandria, Va.'s, city council has already approved a \$34 million bond issue.

Rounding out the local share is \$209 million for Washington, D. C., which must come from Congress.

This makes a total of about \$575 million from cities and outlying regions to be served by the rapid transit system. WMATA is assuming a two-thirds grant—about \$1.1 billion—will come through Congress and the Department of Transportation to match the local contribution.

The transit authority also expects to issue \$850 million in revenue bonds to make up the balance of the project's total cost.

1990 Estimates

Estimates indicate that by 1990 the system will be carrying 1 million passengers a day or about 40% of the metropolitan area's population at that time.

In Atlanta, the city and Fulton and DeKalb Counties make up the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority. It will receive construction funds guaranteed by tax bases of the local jurisdictions if voters approve the rapid transit measure.

A \$377 million revenue bond issue will be on the ballot. Another \$75 million would come from the state while the remainder of the project's \$750 million cost, the Atlanta transit authority hopes, will be borne by the Department of Transportation.

When completed the system is expected to carry from 200,000 to 280,000 commuters a day, drawing away many who now drive downtown each day.

MARTA spokesmen believe the issue now is a toss-up. Their hopes for a favorable vote rest largely on four previous rapid transit elections, approved by wide margins, which led to MARTA's formation.