

TRANSPORTATION COMMITTEE MINUTES

October 31, 2006

The Transportation Committee of the City of Mesa met in the lower level meeting room of the Council Chambers, 57 East 1st Street, on October 31, 2006 at 10:30 a.m.

COMMITTEE PRESENT	COMMITTEE ABSENT	STAFF PRESENT
Scott Somers, Chairman Rex Griswold Claudia Walters	None	Paul Wenbert

1. Hear an update on the proposed Bus Rapid Transit service.

Assistant Development Services Manager Jeff Martin introduced Stuart Boggs, Manager of Transit Planning for Valley Metro/Regional Public Transportation Authority (RPTA), Dennis Wahl, an associate with IBI Group (Valley Metro's consultant), and Steve Schibuola, Director of IBI Group, who were prepared to provide an overview regarding the Mesa Main Street Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Study.

Mr. Boggs reported that the Mesa Main Street BRT project would be the first of Valley Metro's five BRT corridor projects throughout the Valley. He explained that the projects, which are fully funded through Proposition 400, are distinct from the freeway BRT projects in that they are located on arterial streets and address transit needs that are currently unmet.

Mr. Wahl displayed a PowerPoint presentation and offered a short synopsis of the Mesa Main Street BRT Study. (The PowerPoint presentation is available for review in the City Clerk's Office.) He stated that as part of the Proposition 400 program, Valley Metro is working on a multi-phase transit study, with Phase I being the Mesa Main Street BRT Transit Study and Phase II the Mesa High-Capacity Transit Study. Mr. Wahl noted that his firm is currently working on Phase I, which defines the initial BRT operation to connect with the Sycamore/Main Street end-of-the-line light rail station and also identifies capital improvement options to be considered as part of a long-range study. He added that it is the goal of Valley Metro for the first phase of the BRT service to open in conjunction with the opening of light rail transit (LRT) in December 2008.

Mr. Wahl further indicated that Phase II of the study, commencing in early 2007, would examine alternatives for high capacity transit service extending east from the Sycamore station and address the timing and phasing of transit improvements in the corridor. He said that Valley

Metro and Valley Metro Rail would also develop an Environmental Impact Statement to determine the most appropriate method by which the phasing should occur.

Mr. Wahl highlighted various features of the BRT such as faster travel times, reliable service, significant upgrades from local fixed route service, less expensive than light rail, and a larger network of high capacity services. He explained that the arterial BRT would provide a broad range of features and said that the ongoing study is assessing the type of priority treatments that should be included. Mr. Wahl also cited possible treatment options such as dedicated lanes, priority systems at traffic signals, efficient fare collection, and intelligent transportation system aspects (i.e., real-time passenger information, signal priority, service command/control, and frequent all-day service).

Discussion ensued relative to proposed vehicle enhancements, including upgraded seating, improved interior treatments, wireless Internet service; that the vehicles would incorporate systems for dispatching, tracking, stop announcements and passenger counting; and that the BRT shelters would include similar elements to those utilized at the light rail stations and provide opportunities to incorporate branding elements that identify the service (i.e., name, color scheme, a unique logo and slogan).

Mr. Wahl continued with the PowerPoint presentation and highlighted a document entitled "BRT Alignment Options in Mesa." He reported that the primary BRT alignment would begin at the Sycamore station and proceed eastward along Main Street to Power Road. He stated that possible alternative options include: 1.) Downtown Mesa alignments on Main Street to 1st Avenue or 1st Street; 2.) South on Power Road to the Superstition Springs Mall area; and 3.) Southern Avenue alignment (with Gilbert Road and Mesa Drive as transition streets on which to access Southern Avenue).

Mr. Wahl advised that he anticipates the planning phase of the Mesa Main Street BRT Study to be completed by December, the design phase to begin in early 2007, and the construction phase to commence in 2008. He added that the bus procurement process would also begin early next year and said that pending the selection of a supplier, it would take a year in order to manufacture, inspect and deliver the buses for service.

Further discussion ensued relative to the fact that in 2003, Main Street, as well as four other arterial BRT routes, were initially identified as part of the Regional Transit System Study conducted by Valley Metro; that the corridors are currently or projected to be high travel demand corridors; and that the RPTA is considering whether to establish an alignment along Broadway Road or to proceed with Main Street as the primary BRT alignment.

Committeemember Walters expressed support for establishing Main Street as the primary BRT alignment. She also suggested that it would be appropriate to extend the transit service south on Power Road to the Superstition Springs Mall area.

In response to a question from Committeemember Walters, Mr. Boggs clarified that the Regional Transportation Plan would include five-year performance audits of the BRT corridors. He explained that the audits would assess, among other things, various infrastructure investments and discussed the necessity of modifying certain BRT routes. He stated that the next BRT corridor is scheduled for Arizona Avenue, which would connect into Mesa's BRT alignment corridor and increase ridership throughout the system.

Committeemember Walters stated the opinion that vehicle options such as wireless Internet service would greatly enhance and widen ridership and allow individuals to be productive during their daily commutes.

Chairman Somers concurred with Committeemember Walters' comment that the Power Road alignment option would be beneficial to the Superstition Springs Mall area.

Additional discussion ensued relative to the fact that the BRT stations and vehicles would provide accessibility to handicapped and physically disabled riders; that the design of the stations would enable level boarding; that the vehicles would provide low floors and wide door access, visual and audio station announcements, visual prompts relative to stop locations, and Braille treatments on signage; and the establishment of Transportation Overlay Districts (TODs).

Committeemember Griswold voiced support for the primary BRT alignment along Main Street as well as the Southern Avenue alternative BRT alignment.

Mr. Martin introduced Mike James, who was recently hired as the City's new Deputy Director for Transit and Planning.

Chairman Somers welcomed Mr. James to the City of Mesa. He also thanked staff for the informative presentation.

2. Hear an update on the City's use of alternative fuel vehicles and provide direction on joining Austin Energy and other cities and utility providers by supporting a resolution urging manufacturers to initiate development of plug-in hybrid electric vehicle technology.

Financial Services Manager Bryan Raines and Fleet Support Director Pete Scarafiotti addressed the Committee relative to this agenda item.

Mr. Scarafiotti reported that in the early 1990s, the Federal government passed the Clean Air Act and Energy Policy Act, which were designed to reduce automotive emissions and the country's dependency on foreign oil. He explained that in 1992, Federal and State governments were mandated to convert 18% of their vehicle fleet to an alternative fuel source by the end of 1995, coupled with an aggressive increase to 75% by the end of 2000.

Mr. Scarafiotti stated that in 1993, recognizing both the need to comply with such legislation and Mesa's access to its natural gas utility, the City addressed the alternative fuel issue by purchasing compressed natural gas (CNG) vehicles. He commented that in 1994, Fleet Support Services constructed two CNG refueling stations and implemented an aggressive campaign to purchase and convert vehicles that could operate on both gasoline and natural gas.

Mr. Scarafiotti further noted that in 1999, the City received a \$674,000 grant from the Arizona Department of Commerce to offset the increased cost of the conversion program. He added that in 2003, approximately 75% of the City's light-duty fleet was either dedicated or bi-fueled CNG vehicles and said Mesa became a leading municipality with regard to using CNG as an alternative fuel. He further noted that in 2004, Ford Motor Company announced that it would suspend production of its CNG vehicles, and shortly thereafter, the remaining "Big Three" automakers in Detroit took similar action.

Mr. Scarafiotti commented that with the above-referenced information and staff's knowledge of the higher costs associated with purchasing/supporting the natural gas fleet, the Mesa Police Department elected to replace its existing CNG patrol cars with gasoline-powered units. He noted that from 2004 to the present time, Fleet Support has continued to replace Police CNG vehicles with gasoline units, introduced a limited number of bi-fueled Ethanol (E-85) vehicles and begun utilizing B-5 biodiesel fuel in 230 diesel-powered vehicles. Mr. Scarafiotti added that the forecast for the Police Department is 64% alternative fuel vehicles and said that all vehicles purchased in FY 2006/07, excluding patrol cars, would be bi-fueled E-85, biodiesel or hybrid powered. He said that staff would be coming before the Council in the near future to seek authorization to purchase two Toyota Prius hybrid vehicles.

Discussion ensued relative to the fact that most government fleets in Arizona have been unable to reach the 75% regulatory threshold; that currently, there are no State or Federal penalties or enforcements associated with the noncompliance; that an ethanol plant is being constructed in Casa Grande and should be operational in January 2007; and that it would be more economical for Mesa to purchase E-85 fuel from the private vendor as opposed to the City incurring the cost to build its own fueling infrastructure.

In response to an extensive series of questions posed by the Committee, Mr. Scarafiotti's comments included, but were not limited to, the following: there is approximately a \$2000 cost difference between a gasoline-powered vehicle and an E-85 compatible vehicle; that biodiesel fuel could be used in any conventional diesel engine and stored in the existing fuel infrastructure currently owned by the City; that it would be very costly for the City to convert all light-duty vehicles to diesel fuel (Note: all medium and heavy duty vehicles in the fleet are diesel); that with regard to the proposed purchase of two Toyota Prius hybrid vehicles, staff considered the "life cycle" cost of the vehicles as compared to a conventional gasoline-powered vehicle, the fuel savings from zero to 25 miles an hour in stop-and-go traffic, lower emissions, and extensive warranties (i.e., 10 years or 100,000 miles).

In response to a question from Committeemember Griswold, Mr. Scarafiotti clarified that the City's two existing CNG fueling stations would remain in production until the remaining CNG vehicles were retired from the fleet.

Committeemember Griswold questioned whether the City could benefit financially by delaying the purchase of any vehicles in anticipation of technological advances with regard to alternative fuel sources. He also commented that he looks forward to national leadership addressing alternative fuel options and reducing the country's dependency on foreign oil.

In response to Committeemember Griswold's inquiry, Mr. Scarafiotti explained that the fuel options he has highlighted during his presentation are "temporary fixes" to a national problem. He stated that in his opinion, the hydrogen fuel cell is a viable alternative fuel source, but noted that automakers are an estimated ten years away from putting the concept into production.

Additional discussion ensued relative to the fact that Toyota is in the third generation of producing hybrid vehicles; that currently, the vehicles cannot function without utilizing both the electric and gas components of the system; that the design for fourth generation vehicles would allow the vehicle to operate on electric drive dedicated or switch to the hybrid component; and that the Prius hybrid vehicle could be used in certain niche areas within the City organization and provide employees with a more efficient mode of transportation (i.e., meter readers who start and stop their vehicles numerous times during the workday.).

Committeemember Walters commented that the government has an obligation to “lead the way” in eliminating pollutants in the air and noted that the City’s purchase of two Prius hybrid vehicles is “a small step” in the right direction. She requested that staff research other positions within the organization (other than meter readers) wherein employees use City vehicles on a regular basis and are required to make frequent starts and stops. Committeemember Walters suggested that it may be appropriate to consider the future purchase of additional fuel-efficient vehicles that could benefit those employees and be a cost savings to the City.

It was moved by Committeemember Walters, seconded by Committeemember Griswold, to recommend to the Council that staff research additional alternative fuel vehicles, and specifically the type that would benefit City employees who routinely engage in frequent start-and-stop driving, and that staff further research methods by which the vehicles could be introduced into the City’s fleet.

Chairman Somers stated that although he would support moving the motion forward to the full Council, he is reluctant to consider alternative fuels that would require the City to invest in any kind of infrastructure, such as E-85 fueling stations. He also questioned the City’s past decision to convert Police Department vehicles to CNG fuel, especially in light of the fact that Ford Motor Company has now suspended production of CNG vehicles.

Committeemember Walters clarified that her motion did not include any verbiage with regard to encouraging capital investment. She also noted, in defense of the City’s past decision to purchase CNG vehicles, that the community and the environment benefited from the use of that fuel source.

Chairman Somers called for the vote.

Carried unanimously.

Government Relations Coordinator Scott Butler referred to an October 2, 2006 letter from City of Austin, Texas Mayor Will Wynn to Mayor Hawker, copies of which were distributed to the Committee. He reported that Mayor Wynn, in conjunction with Austin’s municipal utility, Austin Energy, initiated the Plug-In-Partners campaign, an initiative aimed at persuading automakers to manufacture plug-in electric hybrid vehicles (PHEVs). Mr. Butler explained that Mayor Wynn has sought support from various municipalities and public utilities throughout the country to join in the campaign, including Phoenix, and is urging Mesa’s City Council to adopt a resolution in this regard. He stressed that adoption of the resolution would not commit Mesa in any manner, other than to demonstrate support for the Plug-In-Partners campaign.

It was moved by Committeemember Griswold, seconded by Committeemember Walters, to recommend to the Council that the City of Mesa join Austin Energy and other cities and utility providers by supporting a resolution urging automaker manufacturers to initiate development of plug-in hybrid electric vehicle technology.

Chairman Somers questioned the technology associated with plug-in vehicles and suggested that this option would ultimately increase power grids and “send pollutants downstream.”

Mr. Butler commented that the campaign organizers acknowledge that the plug-in option is not the ultimate solution to reduce the country’s dependency on foreign oil, but said that it is the most feasible solution with regard to the automakers’ current capabilities.

Chairman Somers said that he would support moving the motion forward to the full Council for consideration. He noted, however, that he would prefer to see the Council send a letter urging communities to invest in alternative fuel technologies as a whole and not PHEVs in particular.

Chairman Somers called for the vote.

Carried unanimously.

3. Adjournment.

Without objection, the Transportation Committee Meeting adjourned at 11:50 a.m.

I hereby certify that the foregoing minutes are a true and correct copy of the minutes of the Transportation Committee meeting of the City of Mesa, Arizona, held on the 31st day of October 2006. I further certify that the meeting was duly called and held and that a quorum was present.

BARBARA JONES, CITY CLERK

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