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## **Last things transit needs are billions in debt, more rail for political reasons**

*By Gilbert Andrew Garcia*

During my six-year Metro chairmanship, we added 15 miles of light rail, paid down short-term debt, reimaged the bus network and extended general mobility by securing additional funds for METRO with almost 80 percent of voter support. All of this and more earned us “2015 Outstanding Public Transportation System” from the American Public Transportation Association. But I am proudest of the increased transparency earning the Metropolitan Transit Authority several transparency awards. That is why it pains me to see Metro take a significant step backward in that regard with the proposed referendum.

First, Metro cannot afford to borrow \$3.5 billion. To ask voters for such borrowing authority, while current rail and bus ridership numbers remain below forecasts, while the bus fleet continues to age, while the costs associated with the Uptown Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) remain unknown and while other “state of good repair” investments remain unmet, is bad policy.

Second, Metro does not even provide the voters the priority of projects, the costs of the projects or the schedule of the projects. It is a “trust me” plan, not something that a transparent government agency would propose. In fact, it is irresponsible.

Third, the only thing worse than a bad idea is two bad ideas. Two bad ideas are exactly what’s being proposed with the two rail route extensions to Hobby Airport. Rail to airports always sounds sexy, but it usually has low ridership. We at Metro had an express bus service to Bush Airport but were forced to cancel it because of poor ridership. What’s worse, Hobby airport has significantly fewer passengers and workers than Bush. Furthermore, the estimates I’ve seen show the average travel time on rail to Hobby will be at least 45 minutes because it is at-grade and because of frequent stops.

Business travelers, who are pressed for time, will certainly use Uber/Lyft over rail. And family vacation travelers will also prefer Uber/Lyft as they will not be inconvenienced with carrying bags from home to a car, from a car to a rail station and then from a rail station to the airport gate.

Fourth, rail and transit work only with density. The beauty of the 2003 referendum was that it planned for rail to connect major employment centers with significant density such as Uptown, the Galleria, Greenway Plaza, the Medical Center and Downtown. The proposed referendum includes rail to Acres Homes in northwest Houston. This is another poor choice and will probably have some of the lowest ridership statistics in the country

because the route has little density. It looks like the route was added for the election season.

A different approach with transparency and fiscal responsibility at the forefront is needed. Metro should immediately take over the Uptown BRT. Remember, it is not a Metro project at the insistence of former U.S. Rep. John Culberson. Uptown, as a TIRZ, had no experience building such a major project.

Metro should build the University Line connecting the 22-mile rail network with the Uptown BRT. Without the University Line, the entire system is incomplete and will never meet ridership expectations.

Metro must remember it is a regional agency and not a tool for the mayor. The main function for the agency is to move people. My greatest dream for Metro is to eliminate *all* fares on both the rail and bus systems. Taxpayer subsidies, particularly on rail, are already high. The differential in moving to a free system would increase the subsidy marginally. Currently, total fare box revenue is approximately 6 percent of Metro's total budget, an amount forward-thinking Metro leadership should absorb. And much of the lost revenue would be offset with elimination of Q-card related expenses and fare enforcement efforts.

The last thing Metro needs to do is pile on billions of new debt, add rail and BRT for political reasons, leave the system incomplete and ignore other infrastructure investments. Most important, Metro must not turn the clock back. Today's Metro should build on the transparency and good fiscal practices it inherited.

*Garcia is a former Metropolitan Transit Authority chairman.*