

# FUTURE TRACK

## LIGHT RAIL'S HEAVY BURDEN WON'T SPOIL ITS EVENTUAL IMPACT ON THE CORE



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**AT 4 A.M., THE INTERSTATES HEADING INTO KANSAS CITY TUNNEL THROUGH THE DEEPEST DARK.** What few vehicles there are on the deserted roads shoot around the bends like slot cars without regard for creatures passing in the night. Monster-length freight trains stretch out under the stilted traffic loops around the city, lonely miner's cap lights rolling with force toward smokestacks and glowing factory windows.

Locomotives run day and night beside the city's highways and byways, quickly falling behind traffic moving at higher speeds. All that power rushing in one forward motion, though, doesn't grant the trains any freedom from a dependency on the tracks. Their route has been stapled to the ground with iron ties so all the machinery has to do is follow the bends, completely fearless of where it's headed.

Whether it's a passenger, coal, or commuter train, the direction a railcar takes has been set out for it in plain view. And that is a course completely unlike anything taken by Kansas City's light-rail plan. Last fall, it appeared as if the one aspect of the city's infrastructure that hadn't quite caught up with the times would never happen. Elected officials were frustrated with plans for grand but vaguely described light-rail systems or shorter routes that were resoundingly rejected voters.

But in November, a shot-in-the-dark petition for a light-rail line gave local residents a plan they could envision. Following a route from Kansas City International Airport across the river to the Kansas City Zoo, the plan was approved—much to its detractors' chagrin. Flawed for sure, the voter-approved plan is struggling to get off the ground—but at least it was a vote for something rather than nothing.

While elected officials, engineers, and civic leaders sort through the alternatives for giving voters what they want, excitement is already building city-wide for the improvements the rail system will bring, regardless of how it's eventually realized.

Finally, Kansas City could join the ranks of Seattle, Portland, Ore., and Minneapolis and possibly regain some pride in catching up to—or maybe besting—St. Louis and Denver. Those cities have long since benefited from the quality-of-life improvements brought about by light rail: less expensive transportation, a cleaner environment, less traffic and congestion, and less urban sprawl.



Despite disagreements in the light-rail system's final route, how to finance its construction and upkeep, and even its technology, light rail is on the radar screen. And its proponents, who are backing various concepts, are going to see it realized. In a complete turnaround from any tendency they had ever shown, Kansas City voters approved a ballot initiative for light rail last fall. The plan was unprecedented upon its arrival because its ballot language was the most specific plan ever presented to voters. For the first time, residents had a chance to envision the light-rail route, which would run from the Northland to the city's south side, and all the sites along its path.

Neither the city nor the Kansas City Area Transportation Authority (KCATA) supported the plan placed on the ballot as a citizen petition led by activist and electrical engineer Clay Chastain. Even with a beginning and end point, the lack of which having been the biggest criticism of earlier Chastain

plans, the plan failed to capture the imagination of City Hall.

About a decade ago, the KCATA and the city began developing various light-rail plans, including the recent Central Business Corridor plan. Voters soundly defeated that proposal in 2001 by rejecting a related sales tax.

Many local civic leaders and elected officials thought light rail would never be a realistic option for the city after that plan was trounced. Light rail had already stalled out in other failed petition initiatives orchestrated by Chastain, whose concern for Kansas City and ability to embed himself in local political channels perplexed some political pundits. Chastain, after all, had left Kansas City for Bedford, Va., and he had not managed to develop a plan that captured voter support.

The voters did the unpredicted in approving Chastain's most recent proposal. His plan, which borrows heavily from previous KCATA and city

light-rail planning efforts, was the first to win public approval.

"The plan, as I designed it, goes through some of the most beautiful parts of the city," Chastain says. "It goes through parks, past fountains, and down boulevards. It will get to some destinations some of our residents never even knew existed. Visitors will see it, too, so it really presents the visuals for what this city is all about."

City officials have opposed Chastain's plan from the beginning for several reasons. But its biggest criticism is that the supporting tax wouldn't generate the funding needed to build and operate the rail system. Aside from that charge, city officials also claim the plan is fraught with technical, jurisdictional, and physical flaws.

Chastain says the plan's challengers are limiting its scope and dismantling the aspects that made it remarkable in the first place. His plan calls for the system to use technology similar to a light-rail line in Bordeaux, France, that doesn't require overhead wires, but some engineers say the technology is too expensive and possibly incompatible given extreme Midwest winters.

Two more plans have since entered the mix as alternative plans. Kansas City Mayor Mark Funkhouser is visiting with area mayors in hopes of launching a regional plan. He has pledged that

the city will present voters with a realistic light-rail proposal to consider next year, even if it's not his regional solution. The third plan includes a 12-mile long route with a beginning and end point yet to be officially determined, but possibly stretching from UMKC or the Country Club Plaza to somewhere north just across the river.

However those issues play out, the intentions that drove the voter-approved plan hasn't changed, and its creator seems genuine in his hope to better the quality of life in the city.

"What I ultimately want [citizens] to experience is a sense of pride in their community," Chastain says. "I want to make people proud of Kansas City. The more they feel a stake in where they live, the more they'll want to be good citizens. That's it."

"Good citizens are more likely to pick up litter and to help their neighbors. When they have a commitment to the place they live, they feel good about what it stands for as opposed to saying things like, 'I'm just living here for so long until I can move somewhere else.'"

No matter what form it eventually takes, the improvements the light-rail system will bring to the urban core are undeniable. Exactly how the community benefits from light rail is subjective. But the Federal Transit Authority (FTA) regards ridership as the tell-all figure in a light-rail line's

effectiveness and whether or not it's impacting the community in regard traffic congestion and environmental issues.

Minneapolis, which launched its initial light-rail line in 2004, has already surpassed its ridership projections for 2020. The system serves downtown, the international airport, and the Mall of America. Cities generally provide perfect-world estimates when providing ridership projections to the FTA in order to compete for federal funding, so eclipsing what generally amounts to overestimates is significant in the system's overall success. More than 73 million rides were provided by Minneapolis's transit system in 2006, with 9 million on its Hiawatha light-rail line.

"By the time we finished our 25-year debate and delivered a light-rail system that people could see and touch, it became a catalyst for dialogue about future rail opportunities in the Minneapolis/St. Paul region," says Robert Gibbons, director of customer service for Minneapolis Metro Transit.

The Northstar Commuter Rail line—projected to cover a 40-mile corridor northwest of Minneapolis—is in final design, and it is expected to open in late 2009. Next, the city plans to introduce another light-rail line that will link downtown St. Paul with downtown Minneapolis via the University of Minneapolis. That plan is now in preliminary engineering.

What the final route will be in Kansas City and what the light rail will look like are taking a back seat to how it's going to get off the ground in the first place.

Kansas City Councilman Ed Ford is one of the leaders of a study to assess the feasibility of light rail. His group is working in partnership with the KCATA and Kansas City-based engineering consultant HNTB to develop a realistic alternative and funding strategy so light rail can go beyond the proposal stage and onto Kansas City streets.

"Moving forward, our task is to look at what we can build," Ford says. "Certainly, it's been frustrating at times, but the dissenters are few and far between. The voters have spoken, so now it's up to us to come up with an answer."

Initially, the KCATA's focus has been on technically assessing what voters chose last November. The organization's website has pages and pages dedicated to the engineering reviews that shoot holes in the plan and found it to be "totally infeasible," according to Dick Jarrold, the senior director of system development and engineering for the KCATA.

Jarrold is 25-year veteran of the transit industry, with his career including nearly a decade with the KCATA. He oversees the organization's planning,

engineering, and construction activities. Among the KCATA's challenges is to find a way to fund the plan without undercutting the budget for the city's bus system—an alarming casualty in the voter-approved plan.


"There are corridors in Kansas City where light rail makes sense and can be successful," Jarrold says. "But because of the nature of our community and its growth patterns, Kansas City needs to be selective in where and when to invest in light rail."

The next step in moving the light-rail plan toward approval is called Alternatives Analysis, a study to evaluate a set of alternative light-rail ideas for more detailed study. In this process, the light-rail Citizen's Task Force, led by Ford and KCATA General Manager Mark Huffer, will be considering community concepts. An initial list of alternatives were presented to the task force last month for review and input.

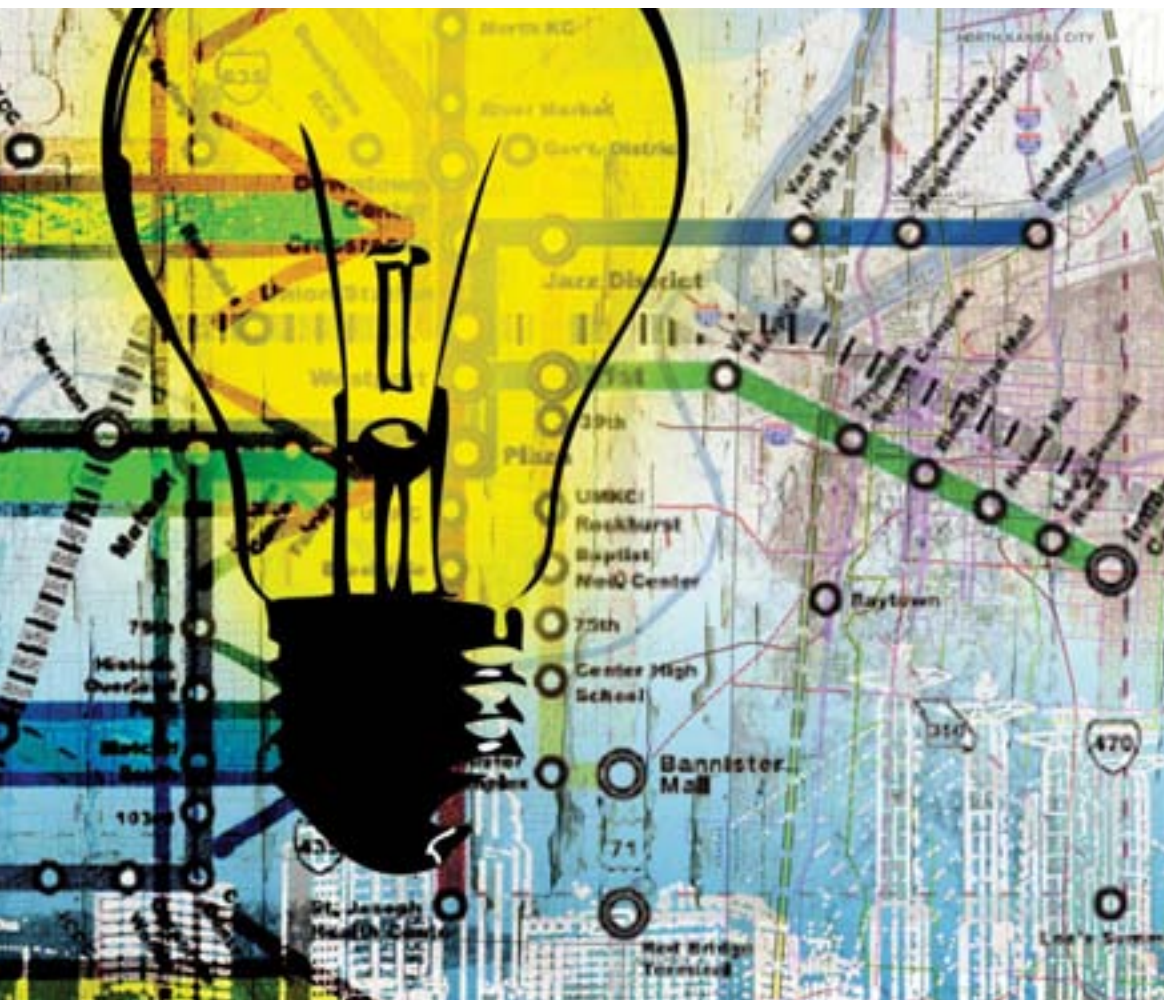
Once each alternative has been technically evaluated, the committee will provide a realistic proposal to the mayor and City Council sometime in early 2008. Alternative plans are being evaluated on a number of factors and comparisons, including construction and operating expenses, environmental impacts, the long-term potential to positively influence development and urban development patterns, and—perhaps most importantly—how well each alternative meets the community's needs and desires.

"The ATA wants to see light rail operating in Kansas City," Jarrold says. "But the investment needed to develop a successful light-rail project is huge—well over \$1 billion."

Before the city makes an investment of that magnitude, light-rail plans will be analyzed by officials and eventually scrutinized by the community and the plan backers. Jarrold says the KCATA and the city are expediting the review process so the eventual plan isn't marred by further delays.

For years, Kansas City voters waited patiently for a plan that had all the aspects it wanted to be proposed. Another few months seemingly won't slow down the community's anticipation for it. The voters are on board with the concept, which is the most important detail of all, even if the political machine has to push through all the particulars with the same constant roll as a freight train. Waiting at the end of the tracks are the improvements that can bring a new feel to the community and another visual reminder that the city once behind in the times has been reborn. 

For more information on the KCATA, visit [www.kcata.org](http://www.kcata.org).



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