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TOPICAL

Moore hops onto transit authority as commuter rail is considered

By Adam Troxell | Transcript Staff Writer 15 hrs ago



MOORE — The city of Moore has agreed to join a regional transit authority that has the ultimate goal of introducing commuter rail to the metro.

On Monday, the council approved Moore's participation in a regional transit authority that would oversee the implementation and funding of a light rail system running through Norman, into Moore, Oklahoma City and Edmond. Though the project is far from implementation, and no money has been earmarked or identified yet, City Manager Brooks Mitchell recommended that the council give the city a voice in discussions to come.

"Ratifying this agreement tonight gives Moore a seat at the table without any additional cost to citizens," Mitchell said. "We know negotiations still need to take place with BNSF to actually come up with a proposal. It allows us to have input into how this is put forward."

Ward 2 council member Mark Hamm and Ward 1 council member Jason Blair have represented Moore at the Association of Central Oklahoma Governments' RTA Task Force, which last met in September. Moore was the last of the six cities involved — including Norman, Oklahoma City, Midwest City, Del City and Edmond — to jump onboard, said Mario Hutchison, task force member, as the chair of citizen group OnTrac.

ACOG is spearheading commuter rail efforts. Its initial assessment from 2014 projected a cost of between \$310 million and \$410 million just for the southern corridor that stretches between Norman, Moore and South OKC. A northern corridor to Edmond would be an additional \$260 million to \$360 million.

Funding is the big issue, and that reality wasn't lost on Moore council members Monday night.

"Assuming this is approved ... some things I'd like our city manager to know is that funding is a big question," Ward 2 council member Mark Hamm said before the vote. "If it's going to be sales tax, that's going to be a hard sale for me to continue to move forward with this."

Hamm is a member of ACOG and has more exposure to the commuter rail idea than other council members, though Moore has been a part of task force discussions. He wants to focus on a bus system for Moore and residents' input when it comes to the city's interest in this undertaking.

"Light rail will need an extended bus service and for that to be an integral part," Hamm said. "I've heard about bus service, and people are in favor of that. I want to know what the people of Moore think about that. I would like for those studies, phone surveys or whatever it is to be broken down into regions, versus just one [whole area]."

Louie Williams, Ward 3 council member, agreed that a bus system would be necessary for Moore to benefit at all from commuter rail.

"I agree with Mark that it would be silly to not move forward and have a seat at the table. A bus system is imperative for this to work; there's no question there," Williams said. "We're at a disadvantage because Norman has one, Edmond has one, Oklahoma City has one."

The council's approval was unanimous, but everyone seemed to have the same thing in mind when it comes to making any final decisions in the future: money.

"That's the big question for everybody is the funding," Williams said.

Melissa Hunt, Ward 2 council member with Hamm, said while she agrees the city should be part of the effort, she is wary about how much Moore residents would actually use the service. That answer would come with additional surveys.

But council members also pointed to this being a multi-generational project. Though it is a present concern, its true benefit will be felt many years from now.

"We're all worried about how much it's going to cost. I would also be worried in the study about different demographics and what they think about this," Ward 1 council member Danielle McKenzie said. "This is something maybe our children will be using, the next generation. It could be 10, 15 years, realistically."

Even those studies will cost money, Hamm said, so the next step for Moore must be taken carefully.

"The RTA (Regional Transit Authority) is going to need substantial amounts of money to continue the studies," Hamm said. "I don't know. To me, it's just a line and it's real fragile. We do need to have a seat at the table and continue to be a part of this discussion."

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