RAILS BULLETIN March 2000

We would like to make a few comments inspired by the recent “Listening Session” sponsored by the Middle Rio Grande Coucil of Governments (MRGCOG) Urban Transportation Planning Policy Board (UTPPB) on March 22, 2000 at the City/County Chambers in Albuquerque, featuring attendance by members of the Federal Highway and Transit Administrations.

We understand that the MRGCOG serves as the Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) for this area of New Mexico and is charged with building public awareness toward compliance with the Clean Air Act, ISTEA, TEA-21, etc., and that federal representatives were in town to see what progress is being made.

There are some hard-working right-thinking people in MRGCOG and other concerned organizations, but we believe that the deck is stacked in favor of highway/automotive interests at the expense of far better transportation options. Two of many reasons we believe this to be true are:

- The Chair of the above mentioned meeting stated repeatedly that we need to wait until some “peer community” moved ahead first. He even used the term “being good copiers.” We submit to you, as we did to him, that if everybody did that, nothing worthwhile or innovative would ever get done in this world. (Check out St. Louis, Missouri and the Phoenix initiative.)
- A member of the NM Transportation and Highway Department recently told a MRGCOG Rio Grande Connections meeting that a regional commuter rail line is impossible because of “tort liability” concerning the BNSF Railroad. We believe this thinking is negative at best, represents vested interests at worst, and that these issues already have been explored and can be worked out.

A glance at MRGCOG’s “Connections” material shows us a pretty full menu of transportation options. The problem is that our public, in general, is aware of only

some of these first-hand. We feel that high priority should be placed on funding and operating working demonstration projects in these missing areas, as follows:

1. A simple, comfortable, “beginner’s” commuter rail system on existing tracks including paved or graveled Park-and-Ride lots at the station stops.
2. A couple of well-located HOV lanes (set aside for buses, car pools, van pools, and motorcycles) carved out of existing freeways or arterials. These lanes could be operated in conjunction with Albuquerque’s ACT NOW initiative.
3. Conversion of at least one bus corridor in Albuquerque from service by a few big buses to that of many amd more frequent small ones, not forgetting CNG fuel, wheelchair access and those great bike racks.
4. A publicity program promoting the above, along the lines of the campaigns for seat belts and sober driving.

Notes:

We are not promoting super-fast rail, magnetic levitation or other sophisticated and expensive systems now or in the near future. Such proposals can actually hinder the step-by-step progress we need to make, at least here in New Mexico. We want Cheap and Soon. Excellent studies and preliminary work have already been done concerning our proposals, especially in the commuter rail area.

Summary

In an era when the drawbacks of our present transportation systems have become painfully evident, we are squandering our health, our sanity, our energy, and hundreds of millions of dollars running to stand still. We feel that the relatively minor cost involved in implementing our proposals for several years will give the public a chance to sample the full menu and actually use all the alternatives presented by MRGCOG and others. This strategy, if pursued, could be long remembered and copied as a model of shrewd and far-sighted investment in the public good. Contact us for more detailed information.

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