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Elgin officials outline need for commuter rail line

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The **Capital Area Metropolitan Planning Organization's** Transit Working Group held its first 2008 meeting on Monday, hearing proposals and plans for transit oriented developments from Leander and Elgin city officials.

Elgin officials outlined the need for a commuter rail line on existing tracks, telling transit group members that approximately 50 percent of Elgin's residents commute into Austin for work. City officials also said the city's tax base revenue in a designated area around the rail line could increase by \$2.4 million if dense development, aided by a commuter train, took place in Elgin.

The **Capital Metropolitan Transportation Authority** currently owns the right of way for an existing but unused rail line that runs approximately 20 miles west of Austin to Manor and Elgin, but the organization has said it doesn't have the money to finance another commuter rail.

In the summer of 2007, Elgin's economic development corporation purchased 80 acres for \$640,000 that it has earmarked for a transit-oriented development, and says it would like to model development on that land after Leander's 2,300-acre TOD.

But at Monday's meeting, Elgin City Manager Jeff Coffee cautioned that the window of opportunity

for encouraging dense development on that land is short, about 18 to 24 months. After that, traditional low-density development is likely to take hold, he says, which could mean a potential loss of \$1 million in tax base revenue for the city.

While Elgin came to the CAMPO meeting with a sense of urgency, transit group member and Travis County Commissioner Gerald Daugherty says he's concerned that Austin taxpayers would shoulder the financial burden of paying for a line to Elgin. Elgin officials estimate it will take \$75 million to \$80 million to get a commuter rail up and running on the line. Coffee says Elgin would want to help finance the line, but would have a hard time dedicating a penny of its sales tax to the rail.

Transit group member and Travis County Commissioner Sarah Eckhardt and Austin Council Member Brewster McCracken suggested the possibility of using revenue from tolls on U.S. 290 East, which is planned to have tolled portions and runs between Elgin and Austin, to help finance a commuter rail to the Manor and Elgin area.

The transit working group is evaluating the potential for additional Central Texas rail capacity, suggested by Austin Mayor Will Wynn in October 2007.