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Metrolink coming to Redlands, eventually

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REDLANDS - A Metrolink extension to Redlands may not be right around the bend, but it is still chugging along.

This month, San Bernardino Associated Governments, the county transportation agency, filed a request for proposals to decide on final station locations for the 9.8-mile stretch of track between its Third Street station in San Bernardino and University Street in Redlands.

The consultant who eventually gets the contract will also be responsible for identifying "transit-supportive" land use policies and economic development opportunities that could put the agency in line for a new federal grant program called Small Starts.

"The money doesn't come until second phase of Measure I. We're just trying to get a head start on this," said Mayor Pro Tem Pat Gilbreath, who is a member of the SANBAG board of directors and the chairwoman of the Omnitrans board of directors.

The Redlands project found a place in the budget when Measure I, the county's half-cent sales for transportation improvements, was extended by voters in 2003. The 2010-2040 extension lists a total of \$362 million for the Redlands extension, a Gold Line extension to Montclair and other Metrolink improvements. Anticipated matches from state and federal grant programs could bring that total up to \$692 million.

Before applying for those grants, the agency will have to put together plans that show the project has a stable operating budget, will be cost-effective and will be supported by "transit villages" that encourage ridership.

This means creating consensus among planners and policy-makers in the cities of Redlands, Loma Linda and San Bernardino, as well as leaders in SANBAG, Omnitrans and Metrolink.

"The contact agency will actually have meetings in town with the Chamber (of Commerce) and interest parties. Obviously the City Council will be involved in those decisions, the city manager and citizens who want to have input," said Gilbreath.

The plan will build upon a 2003 report by firm Parsons Brinckerhoff Quade & Douglas that forecasted growth by 2025 and compared the benefits of extending light rail service to expanding bus service or roadways.

With a cost \$5.46 for each new transit rider, the fixed rail transit won the upper hand over bus rapid service at \$12.15 per rider, according to the study. Total ridership for the bus service topped out at 3,300, while rail service attracted 11,000 daily riders.

Rail stations were recommended at Orange Street, California Street, Tippecanoe Avenue in San Bernardino, Mill Street in San Bernardino and E Street in downtown San Bernardino.

"The primary objective is to get people from San Bernardino County to their jobs in LA," said Cheryl Donahue, public information officer for SANBAG.

Over the past several years, Metrolink service from San Bernardino has continued to climb and, with the housing boom in the Inland Empire, it s unlikely the agency will see a slowdown any time soon, she said.

More than 11,800 people use the San Bernardino line on the weekdays - up 5.8 percent from 2004. At about 37,000, weekends have increased by 33.8 percent.

"That s taking a considerable number of people off the road," said Donahue.

Redlands is also hoping that service downtown will pull in tourists and help make mixed-use development there more viable. The project was one of the few development-related issues that all nine City Council candidates agreed upon during campaigns this November.

"It s a building process. It s block by block," said Kathie Thurston, the executive director of the Redlands Chamber of Commerce. "We have to maintain some focus and never give up."

Proposals for the plan are due Jan. 6, but work won t start until after the contract is awarded in early April. Final plans could be ready by October 2006.

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