

MetroRail really is coming
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Do you remember when Central Texas didn't have toll roads, way back in early 2006, and how strange it felt to know that sometime in the next year or so we would be paying to drive around here?

Even though I wrote about tollways (to excess, probably) for a couple of years leading up to the opening of the first one here around Halloween 2006 (no need for the obvious joke here), the whole thing didn't seem real for almost all of that time.

Then it did. The roads began to have a finished look, the Texas Department of Transportation was hiring tollbooth operators and selling TxTags, and people starting planning ribbon-cuttings.

I got that same feeling last week with passenger rail. People for a generation have began discussing having trains tote folks around the metro area, we had two public votes on it, and there have been people building train cars, stations and bridges, here and in Switzerland, for almost three years. I've written about it over and over, along with every other transportation reporter employed by the Statesman since the Reagan administration.

But somehow it all remained theoretical.

This week, the MetroRail brand became more than a pretty marketing ploy in a PowerPoint presentation. The Red Line went from being, well, just a red line and some black dots on a map to 32 miles of welded steel and nine actual stations. The U.S. government gave the go-ahead, Capital Metro officials stood up in a room and talked about details with a confidence I hadn't seen before, construction ramped up and the agency set an opening date: March 30.

For the first time since the black-and-white-photo era, we're going to have an urban rail line here. For real.

Now, a bit of perspective: This route from Leander to downtown, roughly paralleling U.S. 183 and Interstate 35, cost something north of \$100 million to build. And, in the beginning, officials predict, it will have about 2,000 boardings a day, which means about 1,000 people a day round trip.

Car commuters on U.S. 183 will probably notice no difference in traffic. For those of you who live in other parts of the metro area and get to work using different corridors, MetroRail will be something you happen on when you're off your beaten path.

But something will have changed, nonetheless. Already this month, Capital Metro has submitted paperwork to a "transit working group" about the "sausage link," a proposed 28-mile passenger line (on existing Capital Metro track) from downtown to Elgin. The estimated costs: up to \$192 million in current dollars to build, another \$10 million to \$15 million annually to run it. Officially, it would be called the Green Line.

And of course, Austin Mayor Will Wynn and others have been talking about a streetcar line in Central Austin for a year.

Where would the money for both lines come from? Well, there are ideas, but nothing firm. Only people for it, and people against it, and a debate. Just like before.

But after this week, that Green Line somehow seems like more than a mere line on a map.