

Demonstration leads RTA to reveal project plans

By: Ryan Kelly, Reporter April 16, 2014 0

A demonstration Tuesday from a nonprofit advocacy group prompted transit officials and city leaders to reveal plans for improved public transportation amenities downtown.

Exactly where the money will come from to pay for these projects is still being determined.

Ride New Orleans set up 200 chairs at stops along Elks Place between Tulane Avenue and Canal Street for riders to sit while waiting for their buses. Executive Director Rachel Heiligman said the goal of the demonstration was to raise public awareness and increase the RTA's focus on a facility for CBD transit riders.

Some 5,000 to 7,000 passengers connect to RTA service in the vicinity of Elk Place, according to authority numbers.

The Ride New Orleans event, which had been planned for over a week, influenced the RTA to call a press conference Tuesday morning before the demonstration began. At the press conference, RTA Chief Executive Justin Augustine updated progress that the authority and city have made on planning a downtown transit hub, a project he said was already on its agenda.

Augustine said 20 benches would be installed immediately in the downtown corridor to provide short-term relief for the riders. The cost is about \$16,000, with money coming from the RTA's general fund.

As part of their long-term plan, Augustine said the RTA and city are exploring at least six locations for a permanent transit hub in the Central Business District. Although there were no cost estimates provided, Ride New Orleans later in the day gave a range of \$4 million to \$20 million when listing examples of transit hubs in other cities.

How the RTA or city would pay for a comparable project is uncertain. The authority is pulling together federal money and borrowing against its bonding capacity for a streetcar expansion on Rampart Street and St. Claude Avenue. It is also considering higher fares and a tax proposal to help pay for the project.

The RTA is also moving forward with a short extension of the Canal Street streetcar line to reach a new terminal facility at City Park Avenue and Canal Boulevard. The transfer point averages about 1,800 riders a day. A federal grant from 2006 will be used to pay for the project that had an early cost projection of just under \$10 million.

Ride New Orleans is calling on city leaders to build a downtown public transit hub similar to ones in Detroit, Little Rock, Ark., and Lafayette. Heiligman said transit riders face wait times of a half-hour or more while not having any place to sit or escape the elements.

In addition to the long wait times, City Council members who took part in the Tuesday press conference noted that the riders who crowd near Canal Street while waiting on the bus keep customers away from of downtown businesses.

Finding money from the city for the project will be a challenge while it is trying to figure out how to meet a court-ordered payment of \$17.5 million to the city firefighters' pension fund. The Landrieu administration is pursuing taxes that will first require legislative approval.



Rachel Heiligman, Ride New Orleans executive director, speaks at a Tuesday afternoon demonstration at Elk Place. Members of Ride New Orleans, Regional Transit Authority CEO Justin Augustine (sunglasses) and New Orleans City Council members were on hand. (Photo by Ryan Kelly)

Augustine said the RTA and city were looking into a low-interest federal loan program that would require 49 percent of a project's funding to be gathered locally. He is expected to update the public in a few months on a clearer financial plan for the transit hub.

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