

\$1 Billion in Houston Rail Funds No Longer in Jeopardy

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Going back to his days as a college instructor, Metropolitan Transit Authority CEO George Greanias rolled up his sleeves and moved around the room with a wireless mic as he gave the annual “State of Metro” address. He used the occasion to tell Houston business leaders that federal funding is now on the way for new light rail lines. It’s the first time Houston has received federal dollars for rail projects.

“That’s a major step forward,” he said. “It allows us to complete two lines, the North Line and the Southeast Line, which are essential parts of the long-range transit plans.”

The \$900 million for the projects was in danger under Metro’s previous leadership, when the Federal Transit Administration investigated the agency for violating “Buy America” provisions. Rules state that transit vehicles for federally-funded projects have to be bought from U.S. companies. Metro was looking at buying rail cars from a Spanish firm. That issue has now been resolved, and Greanias said it appears the federal government now views Metro as being committed to solving the area’s mobility issues.

“For a long time I’m not sure that was the thought up there. But I think this represents a conclusion by the federal government that Metro is serious about transit and it will be a good partner, and is somebody worth investing in.”

One of the projects under that grant is the extension of the Red Line, which currently includes major stops such as Reliant Stadium, the Texas Medical Center, and the Museum District. The seven mile Red Line is Houston’s only rail line now in operation. The new Purple Line will run to the southeast of downtown, taking riders to the University of Houston. The allocation hasn’t been approved yet by Congress, but Greanias sounded confident that will happen.

“We’ll have a contract,” he said, “and what that will do will give us a strong level of assurance that the federal government will pay out the \$900 million subject to Congressional appropriation. And I think, from everyone we’ve talked to, from the people on Capitol Hill, the appropriations for these particular grants are secure.”

Greanias also said sales tax revenues earmarked for Metro are up, but the agency is taking a conservative approach in managing those funds. And he said the agency was working hard on transparency, as well as getting the public more involved in planning future transportation projects.

“That’s the most important piece,” he said. “I think everything we do could not be done effectively without good partnering with the community. I think that’s the biggest single change we’ve made. We’re reaching out and people are reaching back to us.”

Along with the light rail line, Metro operates 1300 buses that pick people up at 1200 stops around Houston. The agency also operates park and rides for commuters and Metrolift services for the handicapped.