

Lebanon mixed-use project would be along commuter line



Jack Bell plans a Lebanon project near the commuter rail line that would be Middle Tennessee's first "transit-oriented development." / LARRY McCORMACK / THE TENNESSEAN

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LEBANON — Looking for a new way to develop suburban neighborhoods after the recession, Jack and Rick Bell decided mass transit was the key to success.

The Bell brothers plan to develop the residential-commercial Hamilton Springs project on more than 260 acres they own alongside the Music City Star line near U.S. 70 here. They hope families of all ages will be drawn to what experts say will be the first "transit-oriented development" in the region, built specifically to provide access to mass transit as well as a downtown-like "village center" filled with shops and restaurants.

"Lebanon is in a unique position because of the train," Jack Bell said Wednesday while giving a reporter a tour of the property in his pickup truck.

"The market we think we can hit here is seniors wanting to scale down and young professionals wanting 'urban light.' They can work out of their homes or in downtown Nashville."

Bell said construction is at least three years away, and he doesn't have financing lined up yet. But mass transit advocates say the plan represents smart thinking about growth as gas prices climb and traffic gridlock, like the kind Nashville experienced during a rush-hour snowstorm this month, gets more intense.

"As new development happens, if we can do it in a way that's focused around transit stations, we'll have a much more self-sustaining transit system," said Michael Skipper, executive director of the Nashville Area Metropolitan Planning Organization. "It's the opposite of building the light rail to nowhere."

Ed Cole, executive director of the Transit Alliance of Middle Tennessee, said the Music City Star ultimately would need to add more trips for weekend service to Nashville so Wilson County residents can routinely use it for more than just getting to work.

"It's still commuter rail, for the most part," Cole said. "But this is a good first step."

The Hamilton Springs project, which requires a rezoning, will be up for a final vote by the Lebanon City Council next month. Mayor Philip Craighead said the council fully supports it.

"I know of several people who have moved here because of the availability of the train to Nashville," Craighead said. "We'd like to bring more people from Nashville out our way."

Music City Star gains

The Music City Star hasn't performed the way its supporters initially had hoped since opening in 2006 with a single line between Lebanon and Nashville and stops in Martha, Mt. Juliet, Hermitage and Donelson. Expectation at the time was 1,400 passenger trips a day.

While that goal remains elusive, the train has been more popular than usual lately. Paul Ballard, CEO of the Regional Transportation Authority, which runs the commuter train, said it has provided more than 1,000 passenger trips almost every weekday since Jan. 1.

Gas prices have been rising steadily since September and could reach \$3.75 per gallon for regular unleaded by summer, AAA said last week.

There's no train station at the site of the Hamilton Springs project off U.S. 70 and Horn Springs Road. Ballard said the developers would be responsible for building a station, but RTA would gladly stop the train there to pick up and drop off passengers.

It's not a new idea

"If people want to get on there, I'm sure we would participate," he said.

Bell and his design consultants at Nashville-based Lose & Associates Inc. said transit-oriented development has been rare in the South, though Charlotte, N.C., and Irving, Texas, have begun to embrace it. But Bell, whose house is near the railroad, noted that it wasn't unusual a century ago to build communities along train or trolley tracks.

"What we're talking about doing is not new," he said. "It's old."

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