

THE

Neal Spelce

AUSTIN LETTER

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P.O. Box 1905 / Austin, Texas 78767-1905 / 512-498-9495 / Fax 512-327-1976 / e-mail News@AustinLetter.com

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Dear Client:

The public transportation debate this year has been all about SH130 (the IH35 bypass) and toll roads. Well, there needs to be a resurrection of the discussion about a speedy rail link inside the Austin-San Antonio Corridor.

Whether you think about it every day or not, the fact is **the route along IH35 – right through downtown Austin – is a major international trade route.** And it will only increase in importance as the US and Mexico economies grow and the commerce between North and South America expands. If you listen to the daily traffic reports, you know **IH35 is already a traffic disaster**, with big 18-wheeler rigs barreling along. SH130, paralleling IH35 to the east, is designed to relieve *some* of that traffic. But the problem is IH35 traffic is increasing in magnitude so fast, you may not notice much relief when SH130 is humming.

This is where the idea of faster *commuter* rail (not slower *light* rail) comes in. The Austin-San Antonio Intermunicipal Commuter District is already in place. Preliminary plans have already been developed for a **112-mile rail route running through the downtowns of Georgetown, Round Rock, Austin, San Marcos, New Braunfels and San Antonio.** The downtowns of Austin and San Antonio are 79 miles apart.

The commuter rail proposal would send **trains zooming along at up-to-90-miles per hour, zipping through the heart of these cities with maybe 14 stops along the route.** Operating on mostly existing Union Pacific tracks, it would be a boon for passengers moving between these cities. For instance, the commuter rail line would run down the existing tracks on Loop1/MoPac and cross Town Lake near the soon-to-be modified Seaholm Power Plant where one of the stations is proposed.

In addition to being a hassle-free and safe way to travel the Corridor, commuter rail would remove many passenger vehicles from SH130 and IH35. **Initial plans envision both local and express trains, running from 6 am to 10 pm, every 60 minutes during peak hours and every 90 minutes during off-peak hours.**

Most analysts believe Texans will always keep their vehicles. But alternative means of transportation, as this area doubles in population, must be considered.

The problem with 18-wheelers roaring through Austin on IH35 is more serious than you may realize. Even though 5,000 people a year die in large-truck crashes, some trucking companies are turning to ex-convicts as an attractive pool of low-cost labor and the state of Texas is helping to train them.

This was the finding of a *Dallas Morning News* investigation. Of 953 truckers faulted in fatal crashes from 2000 through 2005, a *Dallas Morning News* analysis found **at least one in four had been convicted of a criminal offense or received deferred adjudication before the crash.** And more than 14% had committed drug or alcohol offenses prior to their accidents and more than one in ten were felons.

That's not all. *The News'* analysis also showed that **at least 137 truckers had one or more criminal offenses in the ten years prior to their fatal accident.** At least 72 had an offense within five years and 28 truckers had at least one offense in the two years before their fatal accident.

And you, as a taxpayer, are helping to put some of these former criminals behind the wheel of big rigs — through classes that train Texas prison inmates to become truck drivers. Over the last 10 years, **a Texas Department of Criminal Justice program has trained more than 1,200 inmates to drive big trucks.** More than 900 received their commercial licenses while in prison.

How these drivers have performed on Texas highways is unclear. But *The News* identified **80 truckers faulted in accidents from 2000 through 2005 who received their driver licenses at the two prisons** where the truck-driving training program is offered.

Let's be clear about one thing: **all of this is legal.** With only a few exceptions, it is also **legal to hire drivers with criminal records.**

But there are those — such as **Tom Smith** and **Joan Claybrook**, both with the advocacy group Public Citizen — who caution against such hiring. **Felons and big rigs are a potentially dangerous mix**, they say. Smith and Claybrook are folks who are usually on the side of those who are, how shall we put it, not on the side of the establishment.

“I'm all for people rehabilitating themselves and getting jobs,” Smith told *The News*. **But when it comes to putting felons in 18-wheelers, “clearly there should be limits,”** he added.

Putting a driver with a history of questionable judgment behind the wheel of an 80,000 pound rig, roaring down the road at high rates of speed, jeopardizes public safety. And we only barely touched upon drug and alcohol usage. Knowing this, and keeping your eyes on the Big Rigs when you drive, adds new meaning to the years-ago slogan, “Drive Defensively.”

Even as Austin's largest business group barrels ahead to create new jobs in the metro area, it notes that "transportation and more importantly, mobility, have clearly become the most significant issues on the minds of most of our 2,600 members."

This is the view of the outgoing Chair of the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce, **Tim Crowley**, who goes on to say that "frankly, it is my understanding that **people just want things fixed**, but the reality is that very few may understand the nuances of cost, funding sources, availability, etc." Uh, oh. Sounds like we're getting ready to be hit in the face with the wet dishrag of realistic costs. And it won't be long before it happens.

"The Greater Austin Chamber will be **mounting an education campaign** to our members and the community at large based on the **realities of funding for regional transportation issues**," Crowley says. "We believe that it is important for Central Texans to understand these issues and to understand the difficult decisions that have to be made by our elected officials and appointed agencies in the transportation and mobility areas."

Crowley goes on to say it is his "firm belief that it will take components of a variety of transportation methods to improve our mobility throughout this region." He says, "We need a **comprehensive and cohesive regional approach of roads, rail and buses** to accomplish the goal of improved mobility within the region."

This is not to suggest The Chamber is abandoning its so-far-successful efforts to enhance the regional economy through its Opportunity Austin initiative to create 72,000 new jobs in the region by 2008. The momentum behind this effort should continue for several years. But as more jobs are created, and the Austin metro area grows, **Crowley's emphasis on mobility and transportation will need to work hand-in-glove with economic development.**

Speaking of jobs, the latest figures show there are fewer folks unemployed in the Austin area than a year ago and more residents working – a good one-two punch that puts the area near the top in the state.

If you thought October 2005's 3.9% unemployment was great, look at what happened this October. **The Austin metro area dropped to 3.7% unemployment.** The US average was 4.1% and the Texas average was 4.6%. Austin's 3.7% tied for 3rd in the state.

Guess which metro had the lowest unemployment in Texas in October? It makes sense when you think about it, but it is not an area that normally pops to mind. **Midland was #1, with 3.4% unemployment, riding the oil boom.** In that same vein, Amarillo was #2 at 3.6% and Lubbock tied Austin for #3 at 3.7% unemployment. Abilene and Odessa were not far behind with 3.9%. Those West Texas oil patches are reliving some economic glory days these days.

So what catches the eye of a writer for a well-known, national business pub while visiting Austin? “Jamming live music. Finger-licking Texas barbecue. Killer margaritas. Celebrity sightings. You expect all that from Austin. What I didn’t anticipate: the navel gazing.”

“Bare midribs are a fact of Austin life, from ripped six-packs to softer versions in transition. On any sunny day in this temperate town – and that’s roughly 300 days a year – expect to see plenty of glistening, athletic bodies,” wrote **Kathryn Matthews** for *Forbes*. “They’re kayaking on Town Lake, which bisects downtown; swimming in artesian springs-fed Barton Springs Pool; and running or hiking Austin’s 50-plus mile labyrinth of park trails, greenbelts and nature preserves.”

She did transition to “business reporting,” by noting that “living well apparently fosters business creativity.” She wrote that “**Austin continues to spawn entrepreneurs**, especially in the fast-growing wireless technology community. Nearly 100 companies employ 4,000 people here, making the city **one of the US’s busiest for business travel.**”

Reviewing the Four Seasons Hotel, she commented on the pool, fitness center and spa “which offers Texas-inspired treatments like the **Margarita Sea Salt Glow** and **Yellow Rose of Texas Body Wrap.**” She continued: “Best of all? Celebrity spotting – I locked eyes with Ethan Hawke as he stepped out of the elevator one morning – and direct access to the Hike and Bike Trail, a tree-lined, eight-mile loop around Town Lake.”

For *Forbes* readers, **she suggested travel to Austin during April, May and October** when “the city is the most visually glorious and active,” but suggested off-season November and December for “warm weather and holiday events,” when Austin is not as crowded.

As has been our custom since we started this letter in 1979, we will take a 2-week hiatus at year end. Your next edition will be January 5, 2007. Meantime, remember **Dr. Louis Overholster’s** advice on how to save money *next* Christmas – ask your friends to sign their Christmas cards in pencil!

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Sincerely



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