

# DON'T BUILD KCI LINK SO QUICKLY

A common concern of Kansas Citians with an interest in public transit: We've got to get to the airport. It's understandable, as many people fly to other major cities and find convenient public transit connections to their urban centers.

Chicago is among only a few U.S. cities that never abandoned their old transit networks. It has a robust service serving its urban centers, connecting a whole metropolitan area.

By contrast, 50 years ago Kansas City abandoned one of the nation's most extensive public transit networks. We now fund public transit at an annual rate of some \$76 per capita, at the bottom of the scale of our competitor cities. In 1946 our transit system served 135 million passenger boardings. Last year we served about 14 million.

Most of the cities that have reconstituted their public transit services with new light-rail



Singleton

investments have not reached their airports in phase one. The ones that did had unique circumstances, predom-

inantly closer proximity of their airports to their urban centers. Denver's first light-rail investment was 4.5 miles in 1990, and only now is it finally planning for a rail connection to its airport, with service beginning in 2013.

The distance from downtown Kansas City to Kansas City International Airport is 20 miles. At \$20 million to \$50 million per mile, that distance would consume \$400 million to \$1 billion in capital investment. In terms of the three-eighths-cent sales tax that we passed last November, it would have to be committed for up to 40 years rather than the 25 we passed. And that would not

even produce any light-rail service south of the Missouri River, or provide operating funds, or maintain the bus system so critical to the light-rail investment.

We don't like to hear it, but KCI is not O'Hare or Midway airport in Chicago. Our passenger volume is 10,569,590 (2006 statistic) O'Hare and Midway combine for 94,000,000 (2006 statistic). The level of ridership that can be reasonably anticipated at KCI does not justify the expenditure to reach the airport at this time.

Nobody said we should never extend light rail to KCI, just not in the first phase. Light-rail starter lines are planned in the densest parts of their cities. There, employment opportunities are concentrated, parking garages are expensive and uncompetitive, distances between origins and destinations are relatively short.

There is a belief that Northlanders voted for the Clay

Chastain plan because it went to KCI. That's probably true. But this community has to recognize its limitations and begin its light-rail service in a rational and informed way that will achieve early success.

After almost 20 years of discussion, ballot initiatives and frustration, there is a momentum abroad in Kansas City that says "It's time." A new mayor and a new City Council recognize the urgency of resolving the questions that remain in implementing the Chastain plan. There is no reason for them to abandon the objective of a light-rail line to KCI. But there is strong reason to focus their attention on a first phase that will be a resounding success and prepare us for a bright future rebuilding Kansas City's public transit tradition.

Kite Singleton is an architect and member of the Kansas City Regional Transit Alliance board. He lives in Kansas City.