

## PRINCETON: Bus Rapid Transit plain roils Dinky supporters

By Lauren Otis, Staff Writer

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Angry proponents of the Dinky train made their views bluntly clear at Tuesday evening's Princeton Borough Council meeting following a presentation by former borough Mayor Marvin Reed proposing a future Bus Rapid Transit system for Princeton that would do away with the 145-year-old train.

Mr. Reed and Councilman Kevin Wilkes described the idea of a BRT system running along the Dinky tracks as a cost-effective and elegant solution that made largely irrelevant a previous difference of opinion over where to site the Dinky station in Princeton. Princeton University, as part of its proposed arts and transit neighborhood south of McCarter Theatre, has said it wants to move the Dinky station 460 feet farther south, away from Nassau Street, but Princeton residents consistently state they wish the Dinky terminus was closer to Nassau Street, said Mr. Wilkes.

As part of a larger BRT system that could be created, one rapid bus line along the Dinky tracks could be terminated right at Nassau Street, said Mr. Reed.

"It gets us out of the debate (over moving the Dinky terminus), which is stalemated," he said.

Mr. Reed said he had showed the BRT plan to Princeton University Vice President and Secretary Robert Durkee, "and he stroked his chin and said 'this is very interesting.'" Mr. Reed said NJ Transit was supportive of the BRT plan, but no formal sign-offs on it from the university and the owners of the Princeton Shopping Center, whose parking lot was proposed to be used as a park-and-ride lot for BRT commuters, had yet been sought or received.

Mr. Reed also gave his presentation on a Princeton-area BRT system before Princeton Township Committee's meeting on Monday evening. At each meeting he said a future goal was for the governing bodies to pass a resolution in support of the BRT plan.

"What is especially compelling about this proposal is bringing the bus express service all the way to Nassau Street," said Mr. Wilkes.

But several in the audience disagreed with the idea of supplanting the Dinky.

"The Dinky link is an enormously valuable asset, it's a unique asset," said Princeton Township resident Alain Kornhauser. "I would ask you all to take a deep breath.

"If we abandon the rail line here for Bus Rapid Transit it will be the first time a rail line has been abandoned for Bus Rapid Transit anywhere," Mr. Kornhauser said. "Listening to the discussion, it seems this is a backroom cook job," with the borough, township, Princeton University and NJ Transit choosing to do away with the Dinky without public input, he said.

"What about this asset? How could we make it better?" Mr. Kornhauser said. "Why hasn't anybody talked about automating the Dinky?"

"I'm very skeptical and I feel not enough planning has gone into this," said a man who identified himself as "B. Lauf" and said he was not presently a full-time resident of the borough. He termed the proposal outlined by Mr. Reed "an ill-advised decision that appears to have already been made to abandon the rail line."

"I feel it is very premature to throw in the towel and make back-room deals, which is what it sounds like to me as well," Mr. Lauf said. Princeton would be "giving up a rail line when so many countries and cities are seeking to reinvigorate rail transportation."

"It sounds like it is a done deal," Mr. Lauf said. "This is unfortunately a sad demise to a long history of one-and-a-half centuries of rail service," he said.

After his comments, Mr. Lauf declined to give his full name or his place of residence to a reporter. "My name doesn't matter," he said.

Council President Andrew Koontz joined the speakers from the audience in questioning the wisdom of doing away with the Dinky.

"It is a very significant step to talk about doing away with that. I have a lot of concerns when we start talking about that," Mr. Koontz said.

Mr. Wilkes said the BRT proposal would help Princeton find a solution to the traffic congestion that is routine at present, and broaden the pool of those who could use the public transit system beyond the Dinky's core constituency of commuters.

"Yes, we do trade off something precious, something proven, something historically well-credentialed," he said.

"You're right Andrew, we don't love buses like we love trains, but we can't get a train to turn right at Nassau. A rubber-wheeled vehicle is the best chance we've got," Mr. Wilkes said.

The Dinky is the shortest scheduled rail line in the U.S., said Councilman David Goldfarb. Given past interest in suspending the service and proposed current cuts at NJ Transit, "the handwriting is on the wall with respect to the Dinky," said Mr. Goldfarb, who said he endorsed the BRT concept.

Over the years it has taken a lot of political will and muscle to keep the Dinky, Mr. Goldfarb said.

"I'm not so sure frankly whether we can do it indefinitely," he said.

Mr. Reed said the possibility of a BRT system for the Princeton region, anchored by the dedicated express bus from Princeton Junction to Nassau Street along the Dinky tracks, emerged out of conversations between the Master Plan Subcommittee of the Regional Planning Board of Princeton, which he chairs, neighboring municipalities, NJ Transit, the state Department of Transportation and other agencies.

BRT buses are more efficient and sophisticated than current NJ Transit buses, and a BRT system combines the infrastructure and "branding" of rail transit with flexible routes, Mr. Reed told each governing body.

"The system is rail-like, faster, frequent and with improved reliability," he said.

In addition to ending the debate over siting the Dinky station, removing the Dinky train and tracks and not replacing them would save a large amount of money on the project, Mr. Reed said. The Dinky right-of-way would be converted into two exclusive BRT express roadways as well as a parallel walkway/bikeway, he said.

The goal for the new BRT line from Princeton Junction to Nassau Street would be a one-way trip time of 10 minutes, and a frequency of one trip every 10 minutes, Mr. Reed said. Federal funding was a possibility for the project with this type of service, he said.

The initial phase of the plan would involve new frequent BRT service being offered along existing bus routes, between the Junction and downtown Princeton, as well as along bus routes to the Princeton Shopping Center, the new hospital on Route 1 in Plainsboro, Plainsboro's new downtown, and in the south to Burlington and Bordentown, Mr. Reed said.

Princeton Borough resident Eric Dutaud said it currently takes him three minutes each way on the Dinky to and from Princeton Junction — Mr. Reed noted the scheduled trip time is five minutes — and if that trip time was increased to 10 minutes, his added travel time over a week increased significantly.

"When you do that 10 times a week the difference is huge," Mr. Dutaud said.

Increasing the one-way time and making him take a bus along Alexander Road, which Mr. Dutaud said was frequently congested, might encourage him to drive his car instead, the exact opposite of public officials' intent to recruit more public transit riders.

Mr. Reed said his presentations on the BRT plan before Borough Council and Township Committee were "the first time we've really had an opportunity to come out and discuss it in public."

He said public discussion would help the Master Plan Subcommittee "refine our thinking" and pass the plan to the Regional Planning Board, where only after further public exposure and debate would a proposed resolution be brought to the governing bodies.

lotis@centraljersey.com

Staff photo by Mark CzajkowskiPassengers wait patiently Wednesday as the Dinky arrives at Princeton University, on its shuttle run from the Princeton Junction station.

Staff photo by Mark CzajkowskiFuturistic plan to replace the Dinky, left, with a "Bus Rapid Transit" system serving downtown Princeton angers some residents.

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