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Expert: Commuter rail will drive development

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Folks need to re-learn that “transportation drives development,” a nationally renowned transit specialist said Wednesday during a transportation meeting in Macon.

“The transportation comes first and it sparks development. ... It’s how cities have been built for centuries,” said Chris Leinberger, professor and founding director of the graduate real estate development program at the University of Michigan.



BEAU CABELL/THE TELEGRAPH Chris Leinberger delivers a presentation to the Intermodal Committee of the State Transportation Board in which he said rail transportation is going to be essential for communities to grow in the 21st century.

Leinberger was speaking at the Intermodal Committee of the State Transportation Board at the Macon Marriott City Center Hotel, and he was making the case for Georgia to build a commuter rail line from Atlanta to Macon through the use of regional transportation sales tax and federal grants.

Several local government and business leaders attended the meeting.

Last month, Macon’s plan to get commuter rail to Atlanta was denied by the state from the list of approved projects, but the state approved rail line upgrades in Bibb and Monroe counties.

However, commuter rail was approved from Atlanta to Griffin.

During the 19th century, freight rail lines were built to further economic development, and in the 20th century freeways and airports did the same, Leinberger said.

“A new option is needed -- rail transit,” he said. “A knowledge economy is demanding it.”

Leinberger went over the reasons for an Atlanta-Macon rail line:

It is the only project in the Atlanta Metro region south of Interstate 20.

It would connect Atlanta to the rest of Georgia and to Macon. It could create a twin-city situation similar to a regional mall, but the cities are the anchors and “in between becomes quite valuable,” he said.

Millions of federal dollars have been earmarked for the rail line.

A study by the Brookings Institution and others done about a year ago showed that money from local public sources and the private sector “can contribute significant sums to capital cost and operating cost” for the rail line, Leinberger said. “One hundred years ago, virtually all rail transits in this country were built by real estate developers.”

Leinberger is a fellow of the Brookings Institution, which is a nonprofit public policy organization, based in Washington, D.C., which conducts high-quality, independent research.

Atlanta currently is growing toward the north and Macon is growing toward the northwest. But Atlanta is expected to continue to grow, and it will likely become like other cities such as Chicago, New York City and San Francisco that have multiple growth corridors, he said.

“It is probably that Atlanta over the next generation will have a secondary growth pattern to the south, and if you don’t put in the rail transit infrastructure, you are really handicapped,” he said.

“So, there is an economic reason to do this. It’s a plan for the long-haul road of the future. ... For all these reasons you will see this is the future and get out the vote.”

Read more: <http://www.macon.com/2011/07/21/1638381/expert-commuter-rail-will-drive.html#ixzz1SkIVjCdb>