

The Pitch

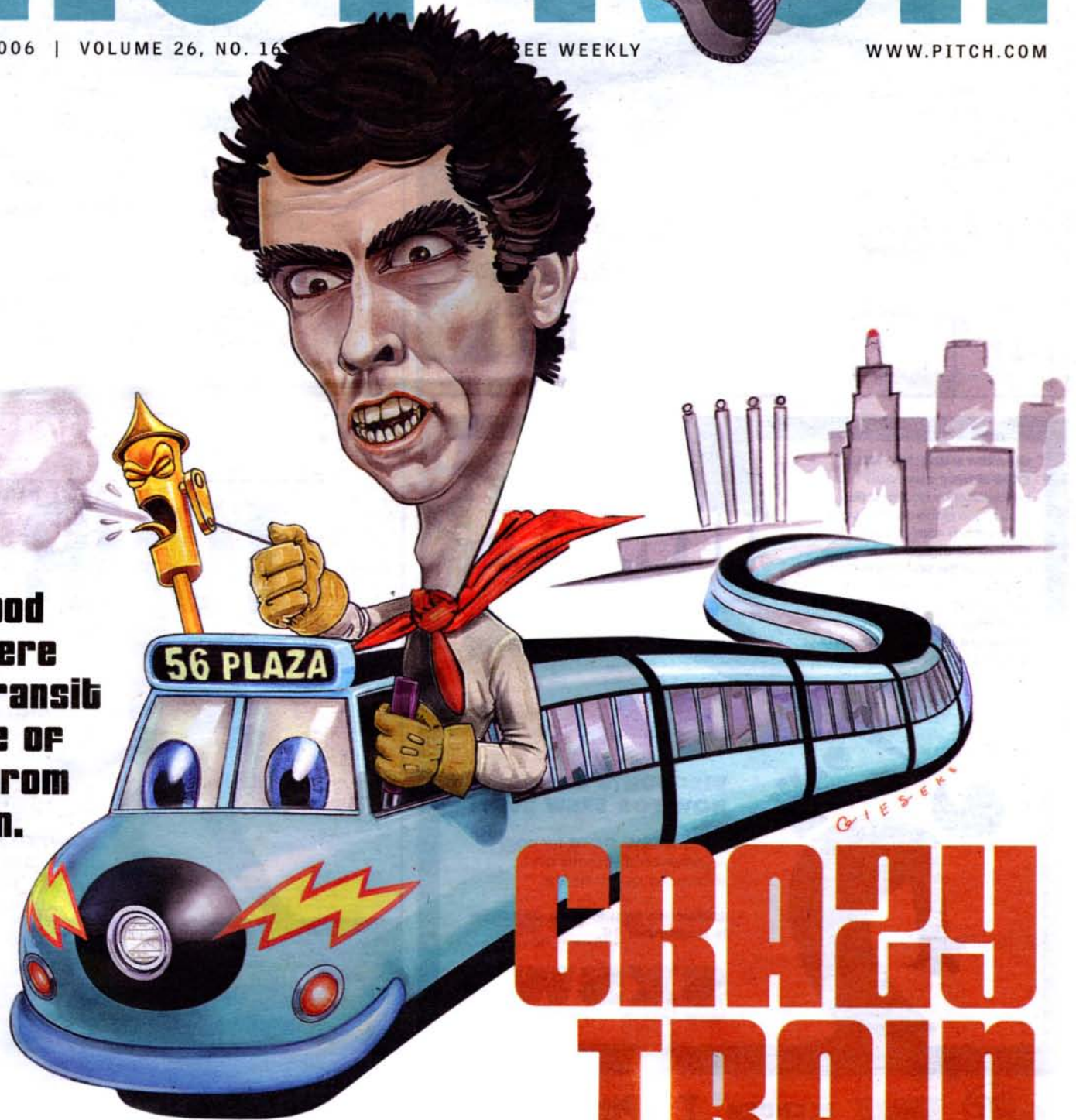
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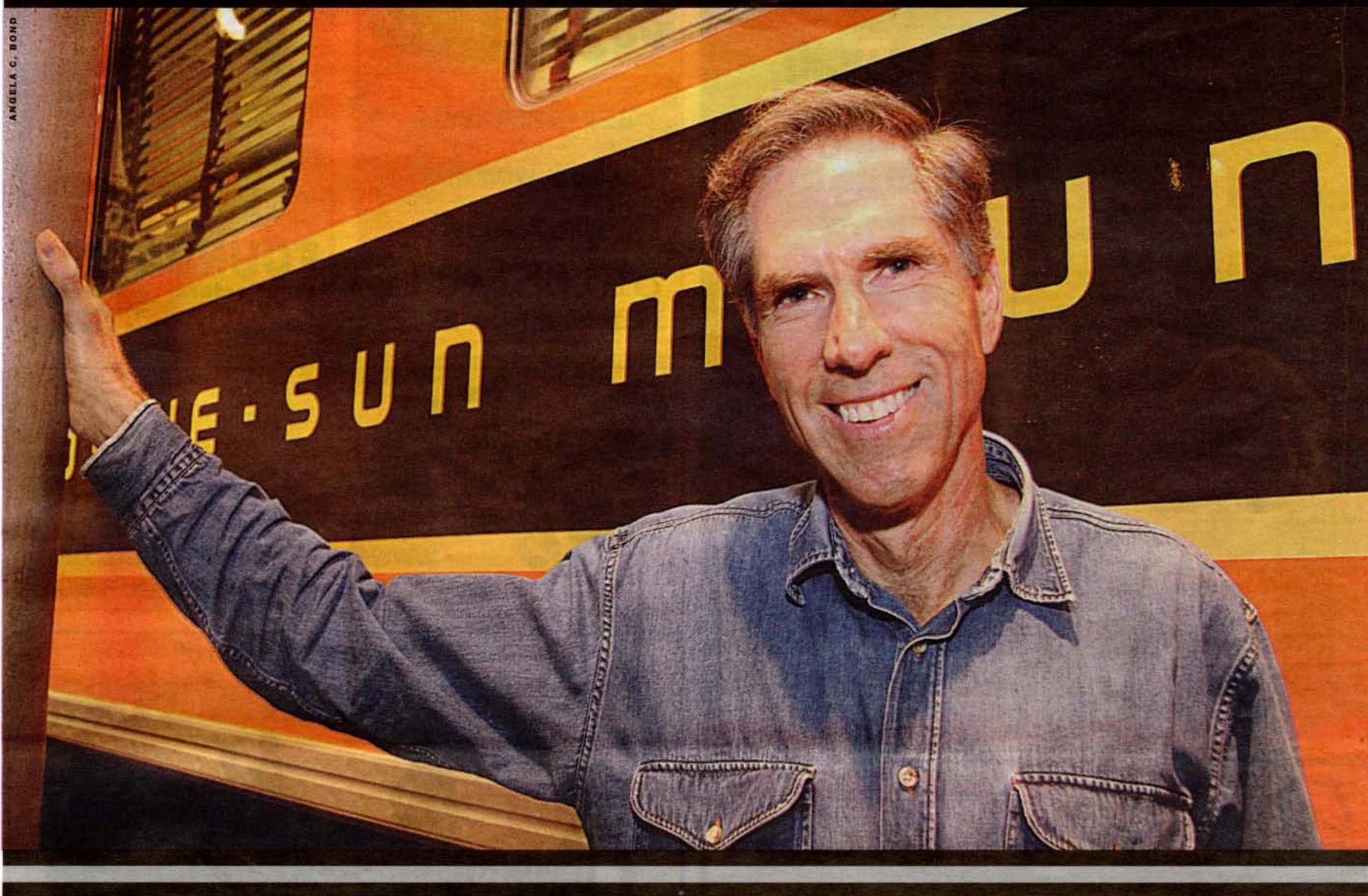


There are good ideas out there to fix our transit system. None of them come from Clay Chastain.



By David Martin

CRAZY TRAIN



ON A TUESDAY IN AUGUST, ALISON Saunders encountered a familiar face at the Westport Sunfresh. Clay Chastain was collecting signatures for yet another petition to build light rail in Kansas City.

Over the years, Chastain has spent a lot of time outside supermarkets, clipboard in hand. He has placed five different transit proposals on the ballot since 1998. He remains undaunted by the scorn of critics and by the embarrassing revelation that he had used the petitions to try to meet women. Voters have rejected every initiative.

Saunders, a self-employed midtowner, recognized Chastain — the lean frame, the heavy brow — from one of his previous petition drives. His latest initiative puts forward a plan to build a light-rail line from Swope Park to Kansas City International Airport. The proposal also calls for a fleet of “green” buses and a Disneyland-like band of gondolas between Union Station and Liberty Memorial.

Saunders signed the petition without needing to be convinced of its merits. “I just

think it’s time,” she says. “It’s the 21st century now. There’s no reason we’re not taking full advantage of all our options for public transportation.

“Plus, I don’t want to park when I go to the airport.”

Chastain obtained the signatures necessary to get his proposal on the November 7 ballot. Dealt a relentless string of defeats, light rail continues to appeal to a segment of the population, at least at the commitment-free petition stage.

With good reason, mass transit appears on a lot of wish lists in Kansas City, slave of the automobile. Only 1.2 percent of workers in the metropolitan area use public transportation. Accordingly, a recent study found that residents spend almost as much to get around as they do on housing. Add concerns about global warming and oil dependency, and light rail becomes even more attractive.

Yet for a decade, the transit discussion has been dominated by a narcissist who is incapable of building consensus — and has a fetish for gondolas.

Chastain, 53, drafted his most recent

proposal in spite of past pronouncements that he was finished with the petition process. After a transit plan went down in 2000, Chastain told *The Kansas City Star* that “this worn path has come to a dead end.” After two more failed initiatives and one unsuccessful run in 2004 for Congress, here he was again this summer, collecting signatures.

Not even a move to a different state could break Chastain of the initiative habit. A semiretired home remodeler, he now lives in Bedford, Virginia, a community of 6,299 near the Blue Ridge Mountains.

Though he’s no longer a resident, Chastain refuses to give up on the idea that Kansas City needs light rail. His belief is almost religious. He even draws an awkward comparison between his efforts and the life of Jesus.

The consummate outsider, Chastain has no organized support for his plan. He has raised no money and is relying entirely on free media to spread the message. Yet thousands of voters will say yes to Chastain’s proposal on Election Day. Misguided as he may be, Chastain taps

into a sentiment that Kansas City can’t keep rebuilding the Grandview Triangle. As Kevin Klinkenberg, an urban planner with 180 Degrees Design Studio in Kansas City, says of Chastain: “Even his bad plans get darn near 40 percent approval.”

Chastain’s latest proposal emerges at a time when transit officials are trying to muster enthusiasm for a regional plan funded by a new, multicounty sales tax. The plan, called Smart Moves, mimics aspects of a subway system and talks about putting existing railroad lines to use. But mainly, it moves people by bus.

Backers say Smart Moves is a practical way to provide better transit. They say it could serve as a precursor to light rail.

Chastain refuses to buy in, however. He wants trains, and he wants them now.

Smart Moves is unlikely to appear on a ballot before 2008. Its proponents have begun the process of convincing people that buses don’t have to be lame.

But first, they have to take the time to explain what’s wrong with Chastain’s latest effort at clipboard democracy. “I’m glad he’s out there at least pushing the discussion,”

**We need mass transit.
But we don't need what
Clay Chastain is selling.**

CRAZY TRAIN

By David Martin

Klinkenberg says, "but I don't think his ballot initiatives are doing any good, other than keeping his name in the paper."

EIGHT YEARS AGO, ARCHITECT KITE Singleton took a trip to Brazil. He didn't go for Carnival or the beaches of Rio. He wanted to visit Curitiba and see the city's magnificent buses.

A member of the Regional Transit Alliance, a citizens' group, Singleton has been interested in transit for 40 years. In 1965, he took a job at a downtown architecture firm. At the time, downtown Kansas City, Missouri, was a happening place. "When it was lunchtime, I had three dozen restaurants where I could go eat," he says.

But the landscape changed with the rise of the automobile and freeway construction. Parking lots took the place of old buildings. The Emery, Bird, Thayer Department Store disappeared. Bretton's, one of downtown's most popular restaurants, went bankrupt. Singleton became convinced that downtown needed a transit solution to remain viable. "The parking demand is unquenchable," he says.

Singleton now works out of his home, so he no longer has to worry about a commute. But he has stayed involved in the push for better mass transit in Kansas City because he believes that people are sick of commuting, and he worries about the depletion of the world's oil reserves. "We're not fucking around here," he says. "This is real. We are at the end."

Singleton traveled to Curitiba in 1998, a year after a proposal to build a light-rail line from the River Market to the Country Club Plaza fell apart before it could get on a ballot. The plan, put forward by the Kansas City Area Transportation Authority, lacked the support of influential property owners. Then-Mayor Emanuel Cleaver famously dismissed the project as "touristy froufrou."

The mayor's remarks devastated transit advocates. "Cleaver just destroyed all the momentum that had been developed," Singleton says.

The defeat sent Singleton searching for a system that could do more for less money. Enter Curitiba.

A city of 1.8 million people, Curitiba is renowned for its **continued on page 23**

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buses. The system functions like an above-ground subway. Riders pay fares in advance and board from tube stations; the buses zip through traffic with the aid of dedicated lanes and priority at traffic signals. An estimated 70 percent of Curitiba's commuters use mass transit. A 2004 U.S. Department of Transportation report calls the system a "model" of bus rapid transit (BRT). A dozen U.S. cities have since started rapid bus lines.

On his visit, Singleton was impressed with the buses and how they seemed to promote activity. Escorted to a TV tower for a bird's-eye view of the city, he noticed that development was denser along the bus routes. "People who say rubber-tire technology does not spur economic development are full of shit," he says.

Smart Moves takes inspiration from Curitiba. Maps of the Smart Moves plan show an orange line joining the airport with Union Station. A blue line runs from Olathe to Independence. A yellow line connects Village West with Bannister Mall.

A regional transit plan has been in the works for 10 years. Mell Henderson, the transportation director at the Mid-America Regional Council, a sponsor of Smart Moves, says planners have tried to balance excitement with practicality or, as he puts it, "interest and tolerance." Proponents of the system seem sensitive to criticism that the plan is not ambitious enough. Promotional materials try to downplay the system's reliance on buses. In the literature, buses become "rapid riders," "local links" and "freeway flyers."

"A lot of people think, 'Oh, buses, hell. That's not very sexy,'" Singleton says. "Clay Chastain thinks buses are dumb and old-fashioned and not cool. I agree to an extent. But when you're talking about public money, you've got to do value. To me, there's good value because you're spending so much less capital and winding up with a result that's comparable."

The experiment with a Curitiba-style bus system has begun already.

SURROUNDED BY SHOPS, OFFICES, NIGHT-clubs and tennis courts, Dick Jarrold is looking at a bolt that attaches a bus shelter to the sidewalk at J.C. Nichols Parkway and 47th Street. "There shouldn't be rust on that," he says.

Otherwise, it's hard for Jarrold, an engineer at the Area Transportation Authority, to find many faults with the Metro Area Express — the MAX. Jarrold worked on the MAX's design; the rapid-transit bus service started in 2005. For nearly 20 hours a day, MAX buses travel between the River Market and Waldo. The system aspires to make bus travel look as inviting as possible. The vehicles have curves and are decked out like spaceships. The shelters are modern-looking, well-lighted and, thanks to global-positioning satellites and computer models, able to tell riders when the next bus is coming with a fair degree of accuracy.

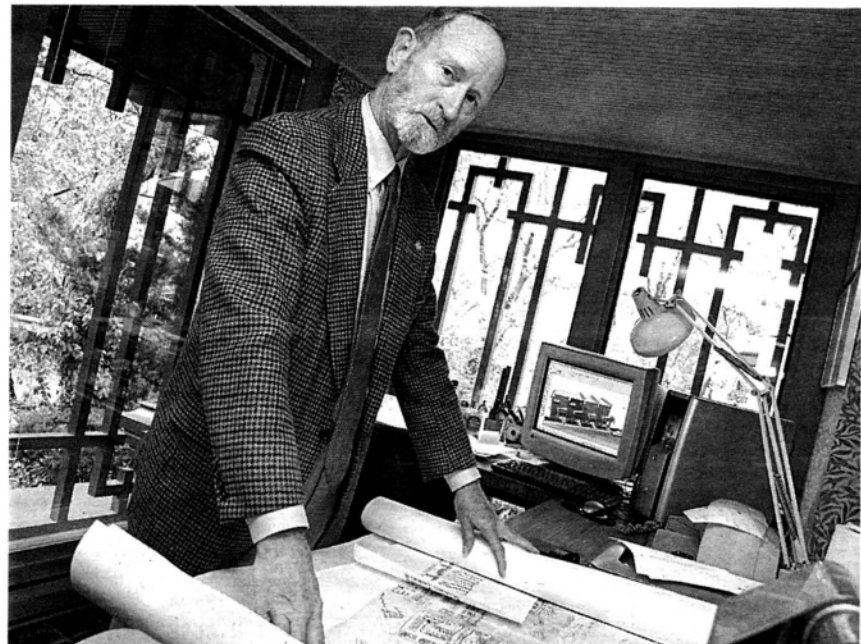
Jarrold and his colleagues were initially concerned with how MAX would be perceived. Would people see it as something new and interesting? Or would they think it was just a bus with a flashier paint scheme? "We felt confident that people who weren't normally riding the bus would jump on it and try it, but we weren't sure," Jarrold says.

Officials at the transit authority began to think about bus rapid transit after voters soundly defeated the agency's light-rail proposal in 2001. (Chastain had proposals on the ballot the previous and following years.) They looked at rapid buses as something that could invigorate transit without having to go to the voters.

The MAX project required \$21 million in capital. The federal government provided 80 percent of the funding. Jarrold says the Federal Transit Administration offers more funding to rapid bus projects because they cost less than other options.

From the start of the MAX, people seemed to get it. Surveys conducted last fall indicated that the MAX was drawing "choice" riders — that is, people who weren't poor. Survey respondents also gave the MAX good grades for speed, value and quality.

In Kansas City, the MAX fills a few



Architect and transit advocate Kite Singleton paid his own way to Curitiba, Brazil, in order to behold the city's renowned bus system.

important holes. First, the maps and updated arrival times at the shelters make it a system that a semi-daring conventioneer could use. Second, the buses run often and late enough for residents to hit the town without worrying about their blood-alcohol level. Jarrold was recently on the Plaza with his wife when he ran into a friend who was using the MAX for what Jarrold calls "entertainment purposes."

No, MAX is not light rail. But it's not the 56 local, either. "The message got out that it is something different," Jarrold says.

The millionth MAX rider boarded a bus in July. More important, last November's survey indicated that 27 percent of MAX passengers were new transit riders. "We think that's phenomenal," Jarrold says.

Planning has begun on a MAX line for Troost, with service to start in 2009. A third MAX line (across the river, say) would need a new source of funding. "We can only go so far without Smart Moves," Jarrold says.

Singleton criticized MAX when the transit authority was putting the system together. He wanted riders to be able to pay for fares in advance to make commutes less like traditional bus travel. But after using the MAX on a day he had jury duty, he says he was able to look past the shortcomings and enjoy the ride. Klinkenberg is generally impressed, though he'd like to see the MAX take a less labyrinthine route in downtown. "At that point, it becomes another bus circulator," he says.

Jarrold, too, would like to change the downtown route. But overall, he's pleased with what he sees. At the Plaza stop with the rusting bolt, he boards a northbound bus. The MAX is nearly full, though it's 4 p.m. and most traffic on Main is traveling in the opposite direction. "We got a load going here!" Jarrold says, taking in all the faces.

Of course, for all its nifty features, the MAX is still a bus. As the bus ascends the

hill in front of the old H&R Block headquarters, rough pavement jars riders the same way it jars riders of conventional buses. The GPS system also hasn't cured drivers from rolling their eyes at passengers who don't ask for transfer slips at the right time. Increasing choice ridership is an important reason for the MAX's existence, but on the trip with Jarrold, fast-food uniforms outnumber neckties.

Still, the MAX has made the case to one important constituent that bus rapid transit is something different. Highwoods Properties allowed a shelter to be built on the west side of J.C. Nichols Parkway.

"Prior to MAX," Jarrold says, "there were no bus shelters in the Plaza."

BEN SILK WATCHES A WESTBOUND UNION Pacific freight train rumble under the new pedestrian bridge that connects Union Station with the Freight House District. Its caboose is still in sight when a BNSF train hauling shipping containers appears, chugging along a parallel track. "I think a lot of people don't appreciate how much rail traffic goes through Kansas City," Silk says.

It's 10:25 a.m. on a recent Saturday. His white hair pulled into a ponytail, Silk stands on the bridge with his wife, Gina. They decided to watch the trains after a meal at the Harvey House, the diner in Union Station. The Silks are familiar with the rhythms of the railroad. The BNSF track skirts Roeland Park, where they live. Horns wail at all hours.

Trains move constantly through Kansas City, yet nobody uses them to get to work. Confronted with the high cost of new rail construction, planners are looking at the people-moving potential of existing train tracks.

The Smart Moves plan sketches the possibility of commuter trains running on the tracks that follow



Seventy percent of the city's commuters in Curitiba use mass transit.

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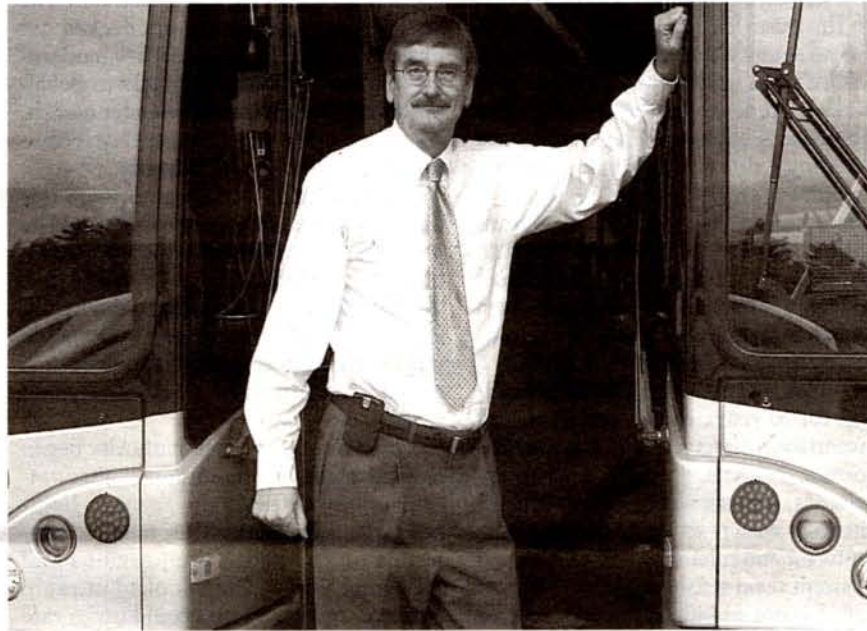
interstates 35 and 70. Commuter trains would give suburbanites the opportunity to get out of their cars. A 1998 study of I-35 and U.S. Highway 69 concluded that commuter rail was the most effective way to alleviate traffic congestion.

In the 1990s, Johnson County officials estimated that it would cost about \$30 million to build a temporary I-35 commuter rail. The county was hoping to tap into the money that the federal government spends

Todd Pelham says the station could serve as an icon for Blue Springs. "We want to embrace it, use it as a marketing tool and really build our future planning around this transportation hub," he says.

Transit advocates express cautious optimism for commuter rail. "The I-70 one is actually pretty easy to do," says Greg Lever, the Regional Transit Alliance executive director. Jarrold says commuter rail has "some real potential," especially along I-70.

Yet, even as commutes have grown more horrendous, commuter rail is years away from becoming a reality, if it ever does.



ANGELA C. BOND

Dick Jarrold worked on the design of the MAX. "We felt confident that people who weren't normally riding the bus would jump on it and try it, but we weren't sure," he says.

on demonstration projects. But after a proposal was submitted, passenger rail services became ineligible for such funding.

A 2005 estimate put the cost of developing a permanent I-35 commuter line at \$200 million. "The longer we've been exploring it, the more those costs have increased," says Chuck Ferguson, the assistant deputy director of Johnson County Transit. Officials are trying to determine if bus rapid transit can accomplish the same goals for less money, Ferguson says.

In addition to cost, commuter rail faces another obstacle: crowded train tracks. Only Chicago handles more rail freight than Kansas City.

Rail traffic is less of a concern on the Missouri side. Kansas City Southern owns the track along the I-70 corridor, and company officials have appeared willing to work with transportation planners. Warren Erdman, a KC Southern vice president, is active in civic causes and chaired a previous light-rail campaign.

Though commuter rail has had trouble getting past the study stage, one city has begun to incorporate the concept into its plans. Working with the Mid-America Regional Council and KC Southern, planners in Blue Springs picked out a site near the city's historic district for a future rail station. Assistant City Administrator

The slow pace of change frustrates Silk, who calls Kansas City's transportation system archaic. "Kansas City is an overly conservative city that is always afraid it's going to succeed at something," he says.

At 10:35, another freight train runs under the bridge, aiming west.

CLAY CHASTAIN ADMITS HE'S MADE mistakes.

His most famous blunder: taking notes in 1997 on women who signed his petitions (one example: "pretty chunky blond"). The *Star* reported that he had tried to make dates with some of them.

Chastain issued a public apology for what he called "inappropriate" behavior. Fond of props, he held a balloon and stood with his middle-school-aged daughter at the press conference.

Chastain will cop to being his own worst enemy at times. However, he says the media committed the greater sin by making sport of someone who tried to make a difference. "The media has fun with Clay Chastain, clowning around with him and marginalizing him," he says. "But it really hurts. The average Joe looks at that and says, 'I don't want to be out in the limelight and be criticized and mocked and humiliated.'"

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became too toxic for Chastain. He moved to Athens, Tennessee, in 2001. Chastain says that he and Valerie Szopa, a lawyer he married in 2002, decided that their relationship would benefit from a start in a new place. Upon arrival in Athens, he bought some houses to remodel.

Chastain had left, but he hadn't buried his clipboard. In 2002 and 2003, he put transit proposals on the ballot in Kansas City. In 2004, he vied for the seat in Congress now held by Cleaver. Chastain promised to move back to Kansas City if he won. He ran as a Republican and came in third in the primary, finishing behind a guy who had suspended his campaign after a back injury.

Chastain also got involved in Athens. He circulated a petition to build a downtown theater with proceeds from a new sales tax. He withdrew the request because of a "lack of support," according to the minutes of a January 18, 2005, Athens City Council meeting. Chastain and his wife then moved to western Virginia, where his activism continued. In a letter to *The Roanoke Times* last December, he argued for more rail transportation along Interstate 81, which hugs the Appalachians.

But unfinished business remained in Kansas City.

In a 2005 letter to the *Star*, Chastain indicated that he planned to form a coalition of support behind a light-rail initiative. But working with others has never been a Chastain strong suit. He tends to reject any proposal he didn't write. As Jarrold says: "It's always his plan."

Chastain defends his approach. The "insider" process, he says, produces flawed initiatives. He refuses to endorse Smart Moves, for instance, because it does not include light rail. "What is their alternative to accomplish what light rail can accomplish? A plethora of diesel buses running around the metro area? They think that's going to work?"

So Chastain stands alone. (An engineer working with Chastain tells the *Pitch* he doesn't want his name in the paper.) Chastain waves away a suggestion that his approach will seal another defeat. Don't discount the power of the individual, he warns.

To illustrate his point, Chastain invokes a famous figure whose clashes with the establishment were well-documented. "Jesus Christ, he stood by himself for the most part," he says. "He had disciples, but he stood by himself for the most part."

To help pay for his plan, which will cost about \$1 billion, Chastain is asking Kansas City voters to divert and extend a sales tax passed in 2003 to support the transit authority. Chastain says the project will also need help from state and federal government.

Critics of the plan say Chastain underestimates the cost and overestimates the likelihood that state government and



Kansas City grew up around streetcar lines. Today just 1.2 percent of the area workforce uses public transportation.

Washington will want to contribute. Chastain projects the cost of an airport-to-Swope Park line at \$35 million. Jarrold thinks it would cost 50 percent more. "He can't deliver it for that three-eighths-cent sales tax," Jarrold says. "I don't think he does any of us any favors by sketching something out on the back of an envelope and calling it a plan. It's so thoughtless."

Even if capital costs could be contained, the transit authority would still need to provide bus service. Lever, at the Regional Transit Alliance, says Chastain's initiative would deprive the transit authority of an important source of revenue and result in a 40 percent cut to service.

The aerial tram from Union Station to Liberty Memorial, which Chastain has talked about for years, provides another source of exasperation. Some Chastain critics have taken to calling his latest proposal the "gondola plan" in an effort to trivialize it.

On September 15, the Regional Transit Alliance passed a resolution formally opposing Chastain's proposal, Question 2 on the ballot in Kansas City, Missouri. The resolution asserts that Question 2 "is bad for transit, cost-prohibitive and less effective at reducing pollution than the Smart Moves plan." Janet Rogers, a transit alliance member, says Chastain's proposal sounds neat but is just not practical. "I want to spend my money for what's real," she says.

The message hasn't gotten to everyone. In an October 4 Hearne Christopher Jr. column in the *Star*, Cleaver praised Chastain's "tenacity." Cleaver stopped short of endorsing Chastain's plan, but he didn't say it was ridiculous, either.

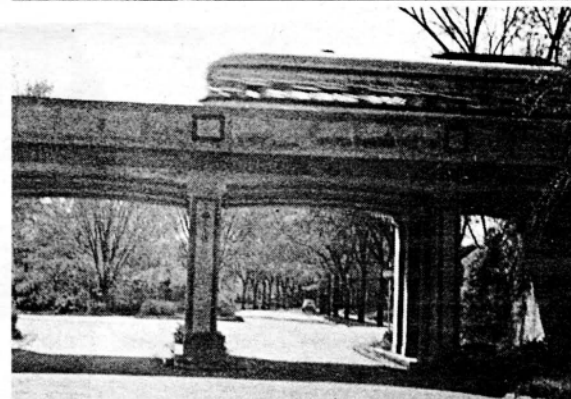
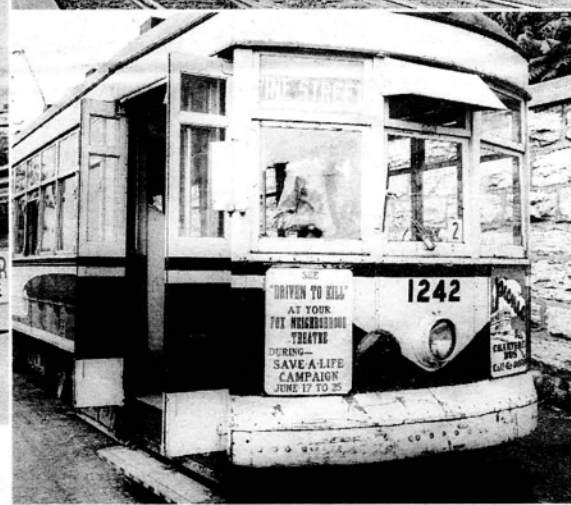
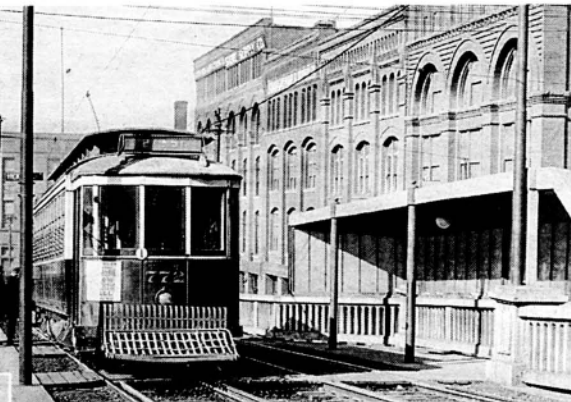
Singleton was furious. He thought Cleaver had missed an easy opportunity to take apart Chastain's plan and present an alternative. "He ought to know better, because I've talked to him about Smart Moves," Singleton told members of the Mid-America Regional Council's transit committee, which met on the day that Cleaver's comments appeared in the newspaper.

Singleton believed that Cleaver should atone for committing a second sin against transit. "He needs to make amends, says I," Singleton said.

A MAN WITH A BUSHY BEARD PASSES Chastain as he's standing under the clock at Union Station on a recent Wednesday afternoon. Chastain freezes. He relaxes when he realizes that the bearded man only resembles Yael Abouhalkah. "He's a nemesis of mine," Chastain says of the *Star* columnist.

Union Station reminds Chastain of bitter defeats. He pushed for its restoration, only to feel shut out of the process when city leaders came around to the idea. He's happy that the landmark was saved but laments its rebirth as a tourist attraction and not a transportation hub, as he intended. "We didn't capitalize on our potential with this building," he says.

Chastain sees his latest proposal as another test. With the election drawing near, he has arrived from the East to argue



for his proposal. Appearances on public television and radio are scheduled. He also has an appointment with the *Star's* editorial board (where he will sit, presumably, with the real Yael Abouhalkah).

At the station, Chastain is asked what will happen if his proposal fails. "Then we will have made a mistake," he says. "We won't reach our potential."

After the election, Chastain says his immediate plan is to build a new house in Bedford for his family, which includes a baby daughter born eight months ago. His wife, who consented to this petition drive, may not be as willing to go along with the next one, he says.

"I don't want to say that I'm never coming back. I've said that already. But it's extremely unlikely."

He adds: "I'm going out to pasture. The light-rail pasture."

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