Imagine entering a spaceship-like terminal on Loyola Avenue and Poydras Street, boarding a futuristic bullet train suspended high above the street, and relaxing in sleek comfort as you speed to the airport in 14 minutes.

When might you foresee such a vision becoming a city project? The 2030s? 2050s? Never?

Try the 1950s.

New Orleans’ monorail initiative, which garnered national attention in 1958, reflected a number of veins in mid-century municipal machinations, ranging from regional growth and modernization to old-fashioned rivalries and power politics.

New Orleans had since World War II embarked on strident transportation improvements, a priority for Mayor DeLesseps “Chep” Morrison as well as City

Richard Campanella
rcampane@tulane.edu

Th proposal called for an ‘asymmetrically suspended type monorail’ rolling on rubber wheels and powered by diesel engines. Illustration courtesy of the Tulane University Special Collections
Council President Victor “Vic” Schiro.

Both men of political ambition, Morrison cast his eyes toward the governor’s mansion, while Schiro eyed the mayor’s office. Everyone’s eyes, meanwhile, were fixated on booming Houston, which had recently surpassed New Orleans’ long-held rank as the largest city in the region and billed itself as the metropolis of the future.

In response, Morrison spoke boldly of making New Orleans the “Gateway to the Americas.” He also spearheaded a new Civic Center on Loyola Avenue, oversaw the construction of the city’s first Mississippi River bridge and expressway, streamlined key arteries and unified disparate train routes into the new Union Passenger Terminal.

But regional traffic circulation remained problematic. The national interstate highway system was in its infancy, and enough suburbanization had occurred by the mid-1950s to clog traffic on Airline Highway, River Road and Metairie Road.

One way to abet downtown renewal and regional transit was to build a light rail system connecting the city and airport — and why not make it dazzling? This was, after all, the Space Age, and what better way to beat Houston at its own game than to entertain the plan of a Houston-based firm to install a first-in-the-nation monorail right here in New Orleans.

Named Monorail Inc., the company requested a 75-year franchise to build a raised track from New Orleans to Kenner, on which it would run high-speed trains funded by $16.5 million of private capital. Revenue would be earned via the 75-cent fare to the airport, $1 round trip and 50 cents for shorter legs.

To some, it sounded too good to be true. To others, it sounded too good to pass up. Monorail Inc. hired a local frontman named Thomas J. Lupo to persuade city leaders of the latter.

Lupo, who had longtime connections in city government, found a champion in Schiro, who availed to Lupo the resources of his office.

Councilman James “Jimmy” Fitzmorris, who also had mayoral aspirations, viewed the monorail askance on practical grounds, all the more because his chief rival Schiro had endorsed it.

When Morrison threw his support behind the monorail, Fitzmorris hardened his opposition.

By early 1958, the word “monorail” was on everyone’s lips. New Orleans would be first among cities again, the envy of the nation. Everyone’s eyes were fixated on booming Houston, which had surpassed New Orleans’ long-held rank as the largest city in the region and billed itself as the metropolis of the future.

Yet the City Council voted unanimously in April 1958 to grant Monorail Inc. its conditional franchise. In deference to their colleagues’ concerns, however, the legislators attached a number of no-nonsense amendments to the motion, chief among them the need for a feasibility study done by an independent expert.

Up for the challenge, Monorail Inc. hired rail transit expert Col. Sidney Bingham, a former New York City subway chief and the man who figured out how to get 3,000 locomotives and 50,000 loaded freight cars into Normandy in the wake of the D-Day invasions. Bingham investigated the technical issues, and in January 1959 submitted his “Report on the Feasibility of a Monorail System for the New Orleans Metropolitan Area.”

It detailed three proposed routes, all with termini downtown and at the airport but with spur lines as far out as River Ridge, Gentilly and the Lower Ninth Ward. Routes included Veterans Boulevard and the lower Canal Street shopping district, Orleans Avenue through the Fifth Ward, even the French Quarter riverfront. Each would be lined with gigantic concrete pillars upholding a single track 40 feet above grade, from which would hang an “asymmetrically suspended type monorail” rolling on rubber wheels and powered by diesel engines.

More than 50,000 people per day would use four trains from predawn to midnight. Bingham estimated, bringing in more than $3.7 million annually. Numerous stops suggested the vision had grown beyond that of a mere airport connection to become a true metropolitan light-rail transit system.

Bingham declared the project feasible and finished off his report with futuristic graphics inspired by the heady days of the Space Race.

But to hear doubters tell it, the whole notion might well have been phoned in from outer space.

Led by Fitzmorris, council members questioned the routes and predicted vociferous public dissent. Engineers challenged the design, and planners recoiled at the notion might well have been phoned in from outer space.

In response, Morrison spoke boldly of making New Orleans the “Gateway to the Americas.” He also spearheaded a new Civic Center on Loyola Avenue, oversaw the construction of the city’s first Mississippi River bridge and expressway, streamlined key arteries and unified disparate train routes into the new Union Passenger Terminal.

Fitzmorris seemed to admit as much when he finished off his report with futuristic graphics inspired by the heady days of the Space Race.

“Simple arithmetic” exposed the feasibility, and the City Planning Commission staved off later divestment and made New Orleans more the modern metropolis than Houston, whose troubles would only multiply.

Somewhat surprised the monorail was a speculative pipe dream by an out-of-state firm seeking to exploit New Orleans’ supposedly pliable government and use the city as a testbed for an unproven technology. But others might offer a more generous assessment: that an initially impractical idea had morphed into a bold vision for a metro-wide light-rail system, which may have staved off later divestment and made New Orleans more the modern metropolis than Houston, whose troubles would only multiply.

Some might surmise that the monorail was a speculative pipe dream by an out-of-state firm seeking to exploit New Orleans’ supposedly pliable government and use the city as a testbed for an unproven technology. But others might offer a more generous assessment: that an initially impractical idea had morphed into a bold vision for a metro-wide light-rail system, which may have staved off later divestment and made New Orleans more the modern metropolis than Houston, whose troubles would only multiply.

“Soon or later,” cautioned Morrison in his final arguments to keep the monorail alive, “we are going to have to provide the people of this city with some additional form of transportation. The time is now.”