



MARCH 2021

METRO BLUE LINE LRT EXTENSION

Initial Route Evaluation Report





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Introduction

“The Blue Line Extension is an important element of the region’s transportation system. While these potential routes are a good first step for seeing this project to completion, much work remains. We need community input from all of our neighbors and businesses because while these routes begin the discussion, there will be more questions than answers at this early stage. For me, the biggest measure of project success is community support, and the Met Council is determined to deliver a project the community feels is an investment that directly benefits those who currently live and work in the corridor cities.”

Charlie Zelle, Metropolitan Council Chair

“The light rail line is more than just a project to advance – it is a commitment to the residents and communities along the corridor for robust engagement and investment for years and decades to come. The Blue Line Extension will further our region’s transit vision, and it will connect students to schools, workers to jobs, and patients to health care.”

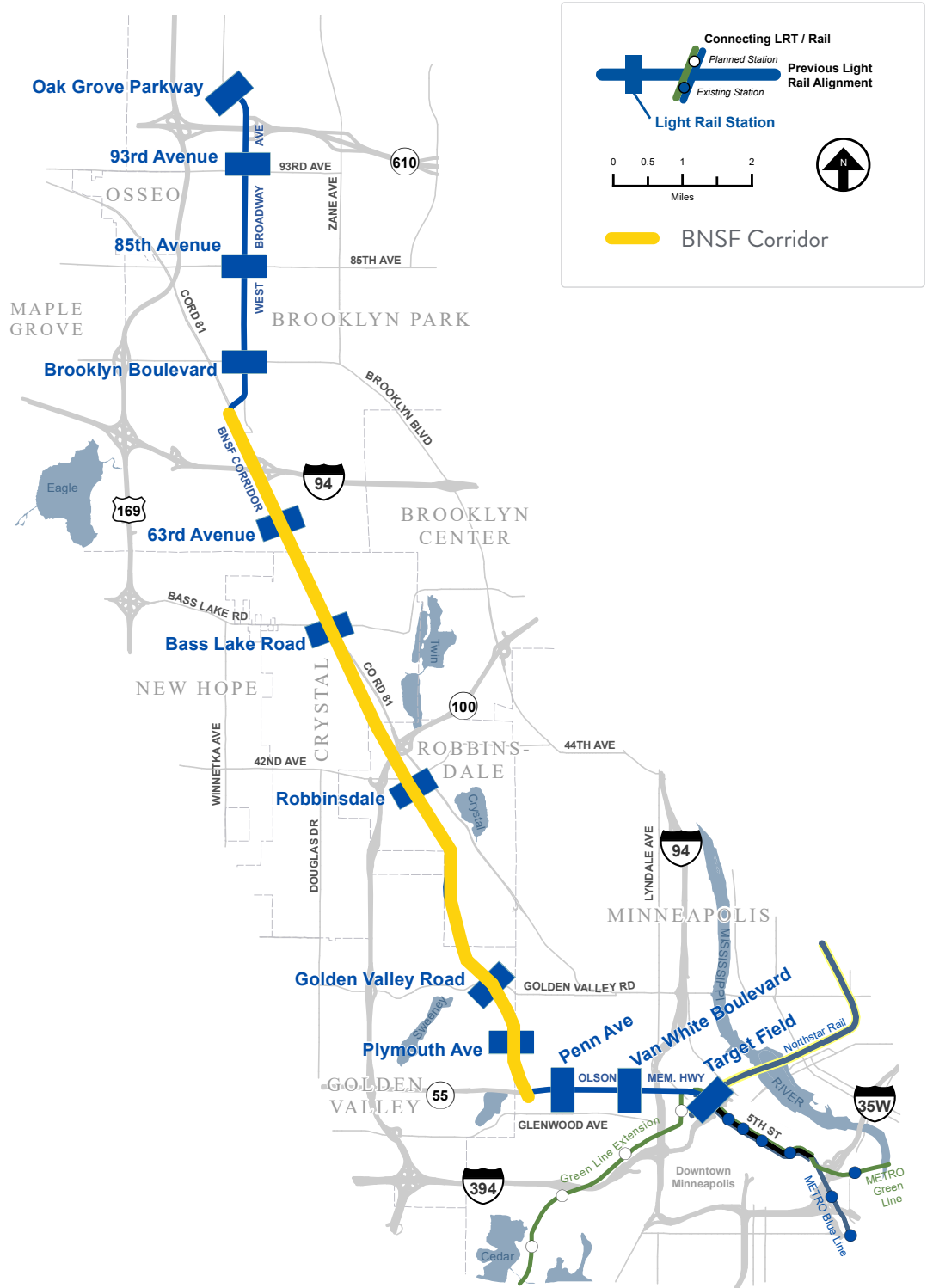
Irene Fernando, Hennepin County Commissioner District 2

These quotes reflect the importance of the METRO Blue Line Extension Light Rail Transit (BLRT) project at both a local and regional level. They also serve to support the project’s purpose statement, which was collaboratively developed during the federal and state environmental planning phase of the project.

The purpose of the BLRT project is to provide transit service that will satisfy long-term regional mobility and accessibility needs for businesses and the traveling public.

Planning for the BLRT has spanned over a 10-year time period. Throughout these efforts, there has been a strong level of collaboration and partnership with agency and community partners at all levels. As reflected in Figure 1: 2013 Locally Preferred Alternative, approximately 8 miles of the overall BLRT project is located within BNSF Railway right-of-way. Throughout the life of the project, Hennepin County and Metropolitan Council staff, along with elected leaders, worked hard to build on a long history of cooperation with BNSF Railway on this project. After several years of unsuccessful discussions with BNSF Railway regarding co-location of light rail transit and freight rail, the Metropolitan Council and Hennepin County announced in August 2020 the need to advance the BLRT project without using freight railroad property as initially planned. Project partners are optimistic this change presents an opportunity to improve the project by serving even more people and key destinations.

Figure 1: 2013 Locally Preferred Alternative





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PROJECT SUMMARY TIMELINE

JUNE 2012

The Hennepin County Regional Railroad Authority (HCRRA) recommended construction of light rail along West Broadway Avenue in Brooklyn Park, the BNSF Railway corridor, and Olson Memorial Highway/Trunk Highway 55.

MAY 2013

The Metropolitan Council adopted the route and mode recommended by HCRRA as the Locally Preferred Alternative in the regional 2030 Transportation Policy Plan.

MARCH 2014

The Bottineau Transitway Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) was published.

SPRING 2014

Station area planning work, led by Hennepin County, began. Station area plans were developed for each station and were included in each cities' comprehensive plan by 2018.

AUGUST 2014

The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) approved the BLRT project to enter the Project Development phase of FTA's New Starts funding process. The Metropolitan Council became the project lead with the transfer of Responsible Governmental Unit status from Hennepin County.

MARCH 2016

In the Municipal Consent process, cities along the BLRT route and Hennepin County reviewed and approved preliminary design plans.

JULY 2016

FTA and the Metropolitan Council published the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS).

SEPTEMBER 2016

FTA issued a Record of Decision. The Metropolitan Council approved the final scope and budget and the environmental Determination of Adequacy, and submitted the application to enter the Engineering phase of FTA's New Starts funding process.

2017 - 2018

FTA approved the BLRT project to enter the Engineering phase of the New Starts process. The Engineering phase includes finalizing design and completing third-party agreements. Discussions regarding finalizing the agreement with BNSF regarding co-location of freight and light rail for approximately 8 miles began.

AUGUST 2020

Hennepin County and the Metropolitan Council issued a joint statement on advancing the project without using the 8 miles of BNSF Railway right-of-way.

2020 – 2021

Hennepin County and the Metropolitan Council will explore community supported routes that do not use freight rail property.

Purpose of this Document

Since the August 2020 decision, project activities have advanced, information has been shared, and input has been received through a variety of means, taking into account limitations during a pandemic. The purpose of this document is to summarize project activities to date and to lay out the framework and timeline for continued engagement and decision making in 2021.

Process Overview

While the direction to avoid co-locating BLRT and freight rail in the BNSF corridor is a setback for the project, it also provides an opportunity to revisit and improve the project by identifying and ultimately evaluating potential routes that could serve even more people and destinations, while maintaining as much of the existing route as possible. Advancing the BLRT project will require continued strong partnership and sincere collaboration.

To that end, starting in the fall of 2020, project partners and stakeholders worked to develop a set of Project Principles that set the project scope and guide decision-making and engagement going forward. These Principles were adopted by the Corridor Management Committee (CMC) at their December 2020 meeting.

As reflected in the Approach to Evaluation flow chart (page 6), the development of the BLRT Project Principles is the starting point for development of the initial routes. This project has a long history of robust public engagement dating to the first project study in 2010. Current public engagement efforts have been designed to investigate the changing needs and priorities of the communities most impacted by the project rerouting. To reflect previous engagement and tailor future outreach according to unique needs and opportunities in different parts of the corridor, three unique geographic areas of the corridor have been identified (Figure 2: Project Areas).

DEVELOPMENT OF PROJECT PRINCIPLES

AUGUST - SEPTEMBER 2020

- Hennepin County and the Metropolitan Council issued a joint statement on advancing the project without using 8 miles of freight railroad right-of-way. The project began gathering public comments on the statement and new direction.
- Corridor Management Committee (CMC) meeting
- Joint Community Advisory Committee (CAC) and Business Advisory Committee (BAC) meeting

OCTOBER - NOVEMBER 2020

- CMC meeting
- CAC meeting
- BAC meeting

DECEMBER 2020

- CMC adopts the Project Principles



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APPROACH TO EVALUATION

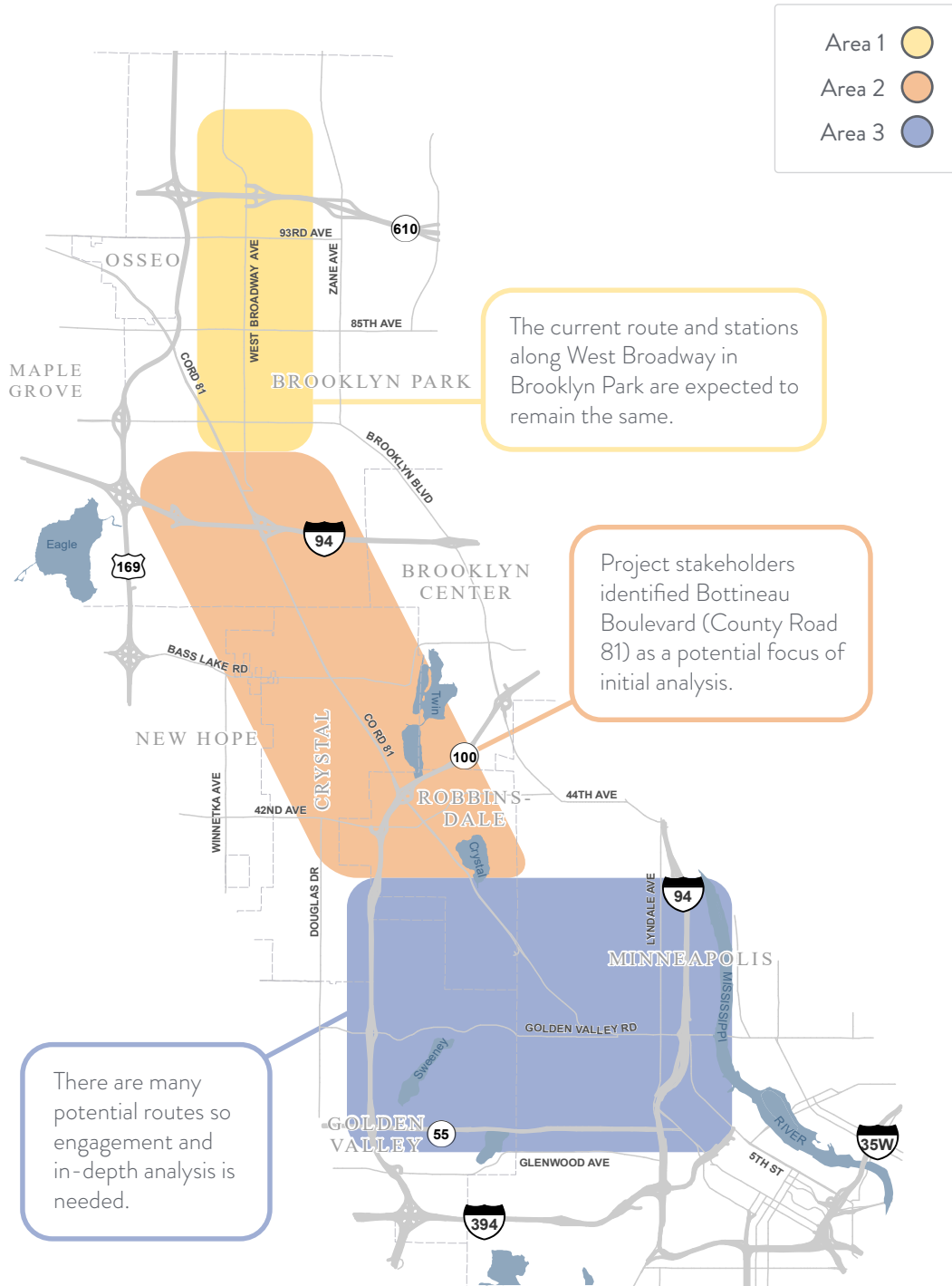


TIER 1: Qualitative Evaluation Grounded in Project Purpose and Need

TIER 2: Quantitative Evaluation



Figure 2: Project Areas





Project Principles

Alignment (Route) Principles

As work on the development of potential new routes continues, the Alignment (Route) Principles will serve as the foundation of the process.



MEET FTA NEW STARTS CRITERIA

- ✓ Maintain BLRT Purpose and Need
- ✓ Maintain mode
- ✓ Minimize travel time
- ✓ Maximize ridership
- ✓ Maximize community and economic development
- ✓ Maximize project rating
- ✓ When appropriate, pursue opportunities to serve even more people and destinations, especially areas with lower rates of car ownership/vehicular access and those with mobility challenges

While it is acknowledged that the current evaluation process will identify a route that does not use freight railroad property, it is important to bring forward the decision-making structure previously developed through extensive coordination and collaboration. This decision-making structure is grounded in the project's purpose and need and its goals and objectives. This approach will also be critical as the project advances through additional federal and state environmental reviews.

These Route Principles also underscore the importance of defining an LRT route that best serves local and regional transit needs while staying competitive for receiving important federal funding for the project.



MAINTAIN EXISTING ALIGNMENT (ROUTE) AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE

- ✓ Maintain existing termini: Target Field Station in Minneapolis and Oak Grove Station in Brooklyn Park
- ✓ Serve the existing corridor cities of Brooklyn Park, Crystal, Robbinsdale, Golden Valley, and Minneapolis and their major destinations

The need for light rail that serves the corridor cities is greater than ever. A tremendous amount of work has been done to advance transit in the corridor – from Target Field Station in Minneapolis to the proposed Oak Grove Station in Brooklyn Park – over the past 10 plus years, including significant efforts by the corridor cities. As reflected in Figure 2: Project Areas on page 7, the current route along West Broadway in Brooklyn Park is likely to be preserved (referenced as Area 1), as it does not require use of BNSF Railway right-of-way. Area 2, which includes a section of the corridor in Brooklyn Park, Crystal, and Robbinsdale, includes a proposed shift from the BNSF Railway right-of-way to Bottineau Boulevard (County Road 81), which largely parallels the railroad corridor. Within Area 3, which is primarily in Minneapolis with a transition in Robbinsdale, there are multiple routes under consideration.



MITIGATE NEGATIVE IMPACTS

- ✓ Complement existing and planned METRO transitways
- ✓ Minimize residential, commercial, and environmental impacts
- ✓ Support safety and connections prioritizing people walking, biking, and rolling
- ✓ Maximize carbon pollution reduction

As the next leg of our planned regional light rail network, this line will connect people to opportunities for employment, education, and health. By maximizing regional transit system connections, the BLRT project will provide the highest level of accessibility (see Figure 3: Existing and Planned METRO Light Rail and Bus Rapid Transit).

Throughout the process, the Metropolitan Council has worked diligently to minimize residential, commercial, and environmental impacts while maximizing multi-modal safety and connections. As routes are defined and evaluated, particular emphasis will be placed on minimizing displacements associated with the project while providing transit that can reduce disparities.

Engagement Principles

As part of the commitment to the community, engagement principles were included as part of the adopted guidance for how to move the project forward. Including engagement as a core part of the overall project work helps ensure the project team is grounded in a community-centric approach that is adaptive to community needs.



MEANINGFULLY ENGAGE STAKEHOLDERS

- ✓ Honor and build on previous robust community engagement
- ✓ Tailor engagement practices to meet the needs of the individual communities in the corridor



ENGAGE, INFORM, AND CONSULT DIVERSE COMMUNITIES TO CO-CREATE PROJECT SOLUTIONS THAT REDUCE DISPARITIES

- ✓ Ensure corridor communities of all races, ethnicities, incomes, and abilities are engaged so all communities and corridor cities share in growth opportunities, with an emphasis on low-income and cultural communities
- ✓ Use community goals, priorities, and criteria for growth to inform decision-making
- ✓ Adjust strategies and approach as needed to ensure corridor communities are fully represented in engagement efforts



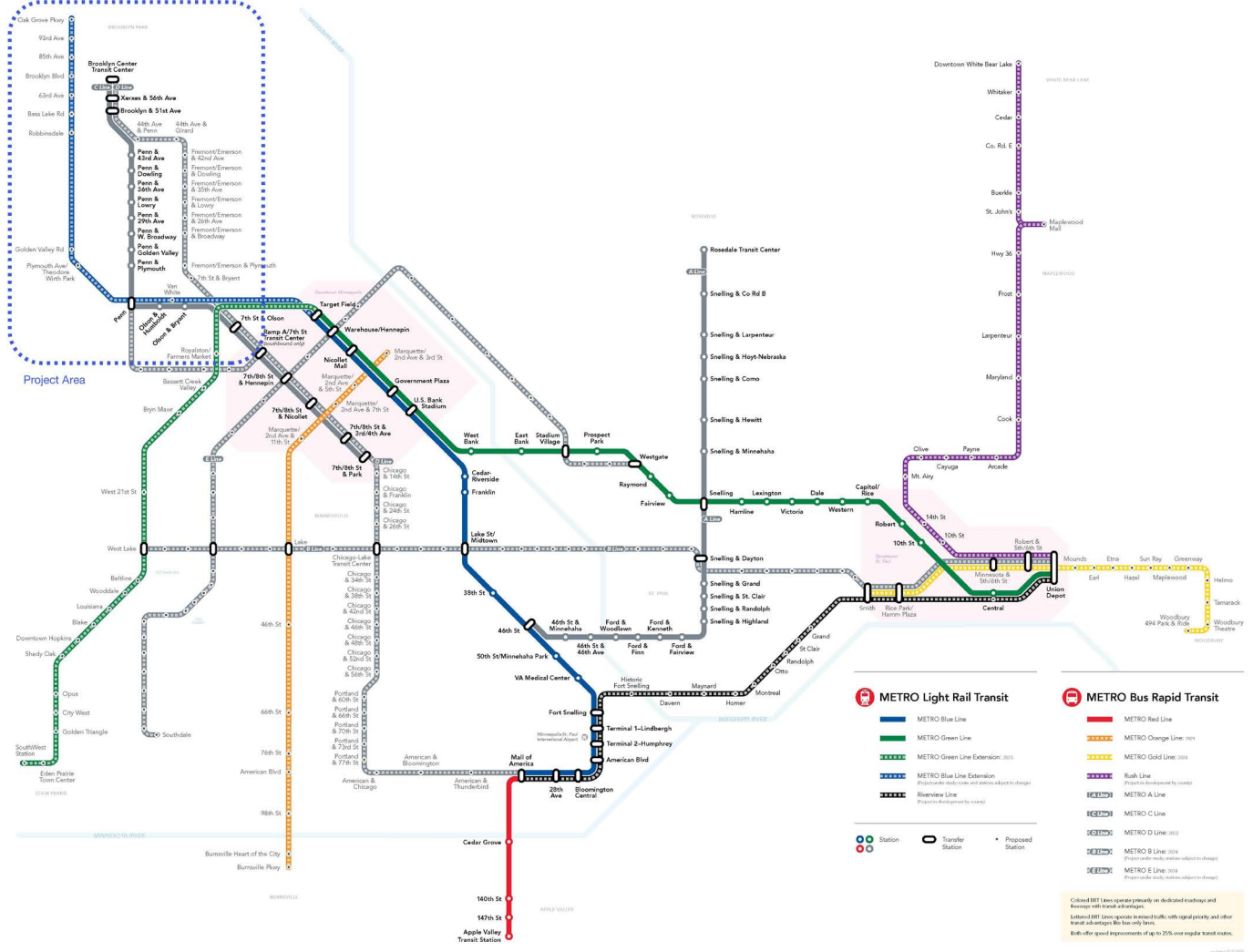
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Figure 3: Existing and Planned METRO Light Rail and Bus Rapid Transit



Fast. Frequent. All day. All yours.

Future Rapid Transit Network



Public Engagement

Initial engagement efforts to begin identifying an improved route occurred during the fall of 2020 through January 2021. These efforts focused primarily on developing a community-informed engagement framework to guide the process moving forward, as well as collecting input on community goals, concerns, opportunities, and thoughts on potential new routes. The focus of public outreach for March 2021 to January 2022 will be on identifying a single community-supported route to advance through the environmental review and route planning processes.

Initial Engagement Findings

In October 2020, the project contracted with three community groups to support this work: Alliance for Metropolitan Stability, Juxtaposition Arts, and Harrison Neighborhood Association. The outcomes of the process included the development of a community stakeholder list, 10 community stakeholder interviews, five listening sessions, over 1,900 community survey responses, and recommendations for the next round of engagement. Survey respondents primarily worked and lived in the five corridor cities (Brooklyn Park, Crystal, Robbinsdale, Golden Valley, and Minneapolis). These responses provided key destinations and priority opportunities. Listening sessions, stakeholder interviews, and discussions with community and business organizations garnered critical feedback regarding process, equity, and many other considerations. Community members also conveyed their readiness to discuss specific route options and shared ideas on potential routes.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES:

Fall 2020 - January 2021



Development of a
**COMMUNITY
STAKEHOLDER LIST**



10
**COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDER
INTERVIEWS**



5
LISTENING SESSIONS

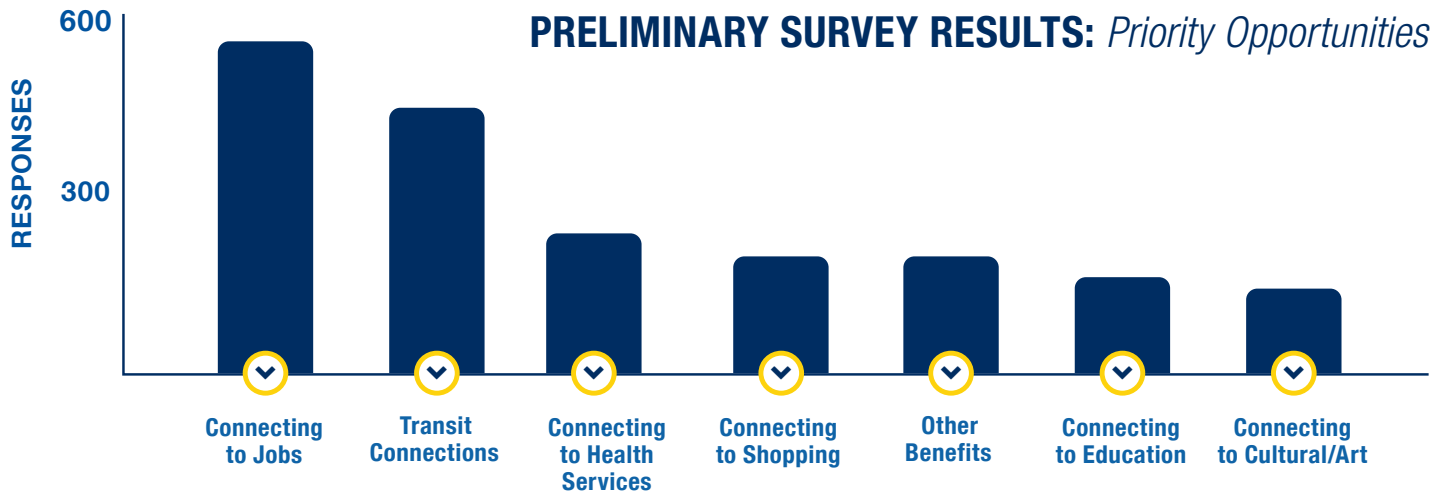


1,900+
**COMMUNITY SURVEY
RESPONSES**

PRELIMINARY SURVEY RESULTS:

Key Destinations

AREA 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target Campus • North Hennepin Community College • Grocery Stores
AREA 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Downtown Robbinsdale • North Memorial Hospital • Crystal Shopping Center
AREA 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • West Broadway Business District • North Memorial Hospital • Theodore Wirth Park



“Move at the speed of trust”

Feedback on Process

In developing a framework for public engagement going forward, participants shared that they would like to provide input on tangible elements of the process (as opposed to abstract ideas). Part of this process should include clarity on the goals of engagement and if information is being shared or input is being sought. No matter the means of engagement, information needs to be accessible, understandable, and actionable. Community members expressed the need for accessible content that sets the stage for meaningful communication, including translations and plain language. Building and renewing relationships takes time, transparency, and answering hard questions. The engagement process should focus on building sustainable and responsive relationships between the community and public agency partners.

Opportunities and Concerns

The threat of displacement was among the top concerns shared by community members, including supporting and maintaining housing affordability and small business leasing affordability. Participants identified the need for strategies, policies, and funding to ensure the project benefits current corridor residents, including building wealth in place for corridor residents and businesses. Participants shared urgency around community benefits including the connection to jobs and services, climate action, and disparity reduction.

More detail regarding the engagement efforts will be available in a report subsequent to this document. The community consultants are developing recommendations based on the initial engagement that will be used to design the next stages of public engagement.

Routes for Consideration

Within Area 1 the current alignment and stations along West Broadway in Brooklyn Park are anticipated to be preserved.

Within Area 2 there are a number of topographic features that limit development of a route for the BLRT, including Crystal Lake, the Twin Lakes, and the Crystal Airport. Considering these obstacles, the Project Principle to “maintain the existing route as much as possible,” and the location of key destinations to serve with transit (such as North Memorial Hospital), Bottineau Boulevard (County Road 81) has been identified as the priority route for consideration within Area 2.

Within Area 3 development of a potential BLRT route starts with identification of points of connection. To the south, the existing METRO station at Target Field represents the connection between the existing METRO Blue Line and the planned BLRT. To the north, the area in the vicinity of North Memorial Hospital has been identified as the location where the BLRT would transition to Bottineau Boulevard (Area 2).

The identification of potential candidate routes have taken into account the following factors:

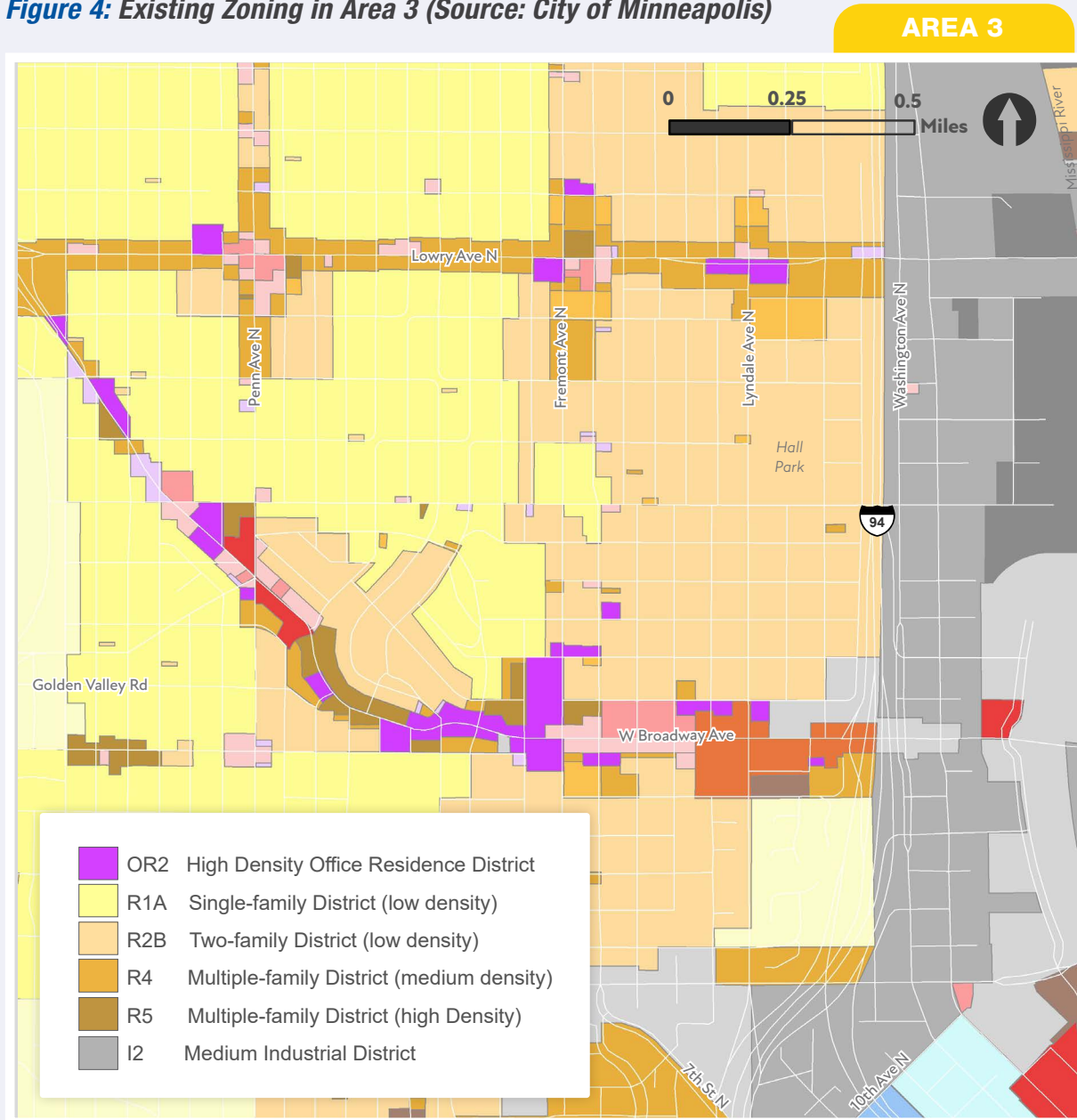
- ✓ **Available Public Right-of-Way** – Based on experience with the existing Blue and Green Lines we know that a light rail guideway requires approximately 30 feet of width (more at stations) for street level service.
- ✓ **Continuity** – A light rail corridor needs a continuous, relatively straight alignment to follow for efficient travel times.
- ✓ **Context** – A light rail line and its stations are better suited to some areas and less suited to others. Higher density residential and commercial areas of employment are best suited to accommodate light rail and maximize community and economic development opportunities. The City of Minneapolis zoning map (Figure 4) illustrates the existing zoning across Area 3. The majority of the area is represented as R1A and R2B (multifamily), with an area of I2 (industrial) east of I-94. There is a concentration of R4 and R5 (multifamily) and OR2 (high density office residence district) clustered along Lowry Avenue N and West Broadway Avenue.
- ✓ **Project Principles** – Several of the adopted Project Principles directly influence consideration of candidate routes including: “minimize residential, commercial and environmental impacts,” “complement existing and planned METRO transitways,” and others.

Using these factors, the project team identified potential routes by reviewing existing public road rights-of-way for suitability. The first round of review identified roadways with public right-of-way widths of at least 75 feet. Less than 75 feet and the right-of-way is inadequate to accommodate the light rail guideway along with suitable accommodation for pedestrians, bicyclists, and motor vehicles. The Area 3 rights-of-way widths map (Figure 5) represents those roadways in a color-coded configuration with red being too narrow and green being more accommodating.

Light Rail Guideway Width

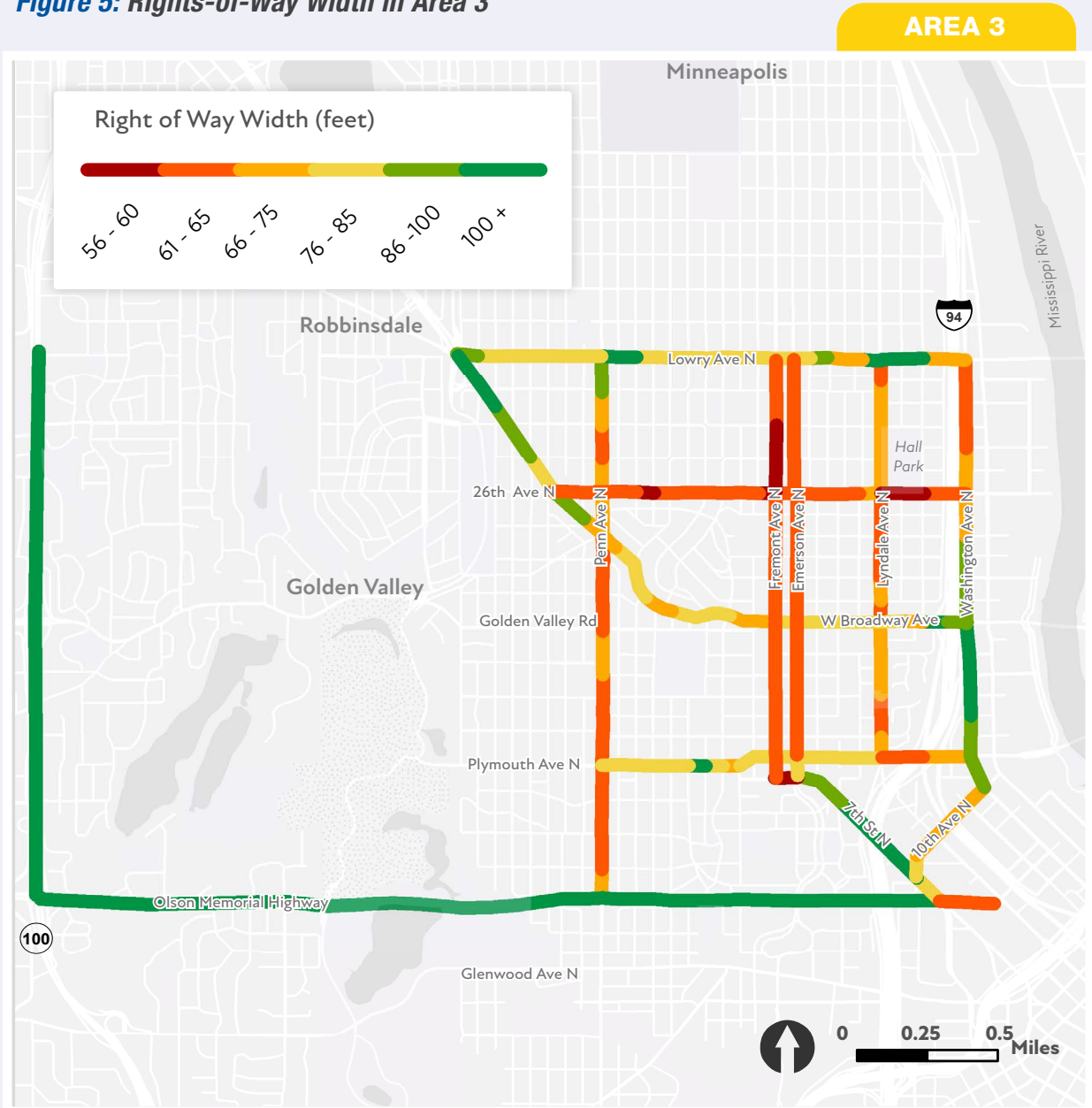


Figure 4: Existing Zoning in Area 3 (Source: City of Minneapolis)



The initial routes identified were further filtered by reviewing them for appropriateness of context and against the Project Principles. This review eliminated Highway 100 because it does not provide a transit-conducive context and is not consistent with the Project Principle to “maintain the existing route as much as possible.” This review also eliminated Penn Avenue N, Fremont Avenue N, and Emerson Avenue N due to their narrow rights-of-way, the existing (C-Line) and planned (D-Line) METRO services, and the potential for significant impacts to area residences.

Figure 5: Rights-of-Way Width in Area 3



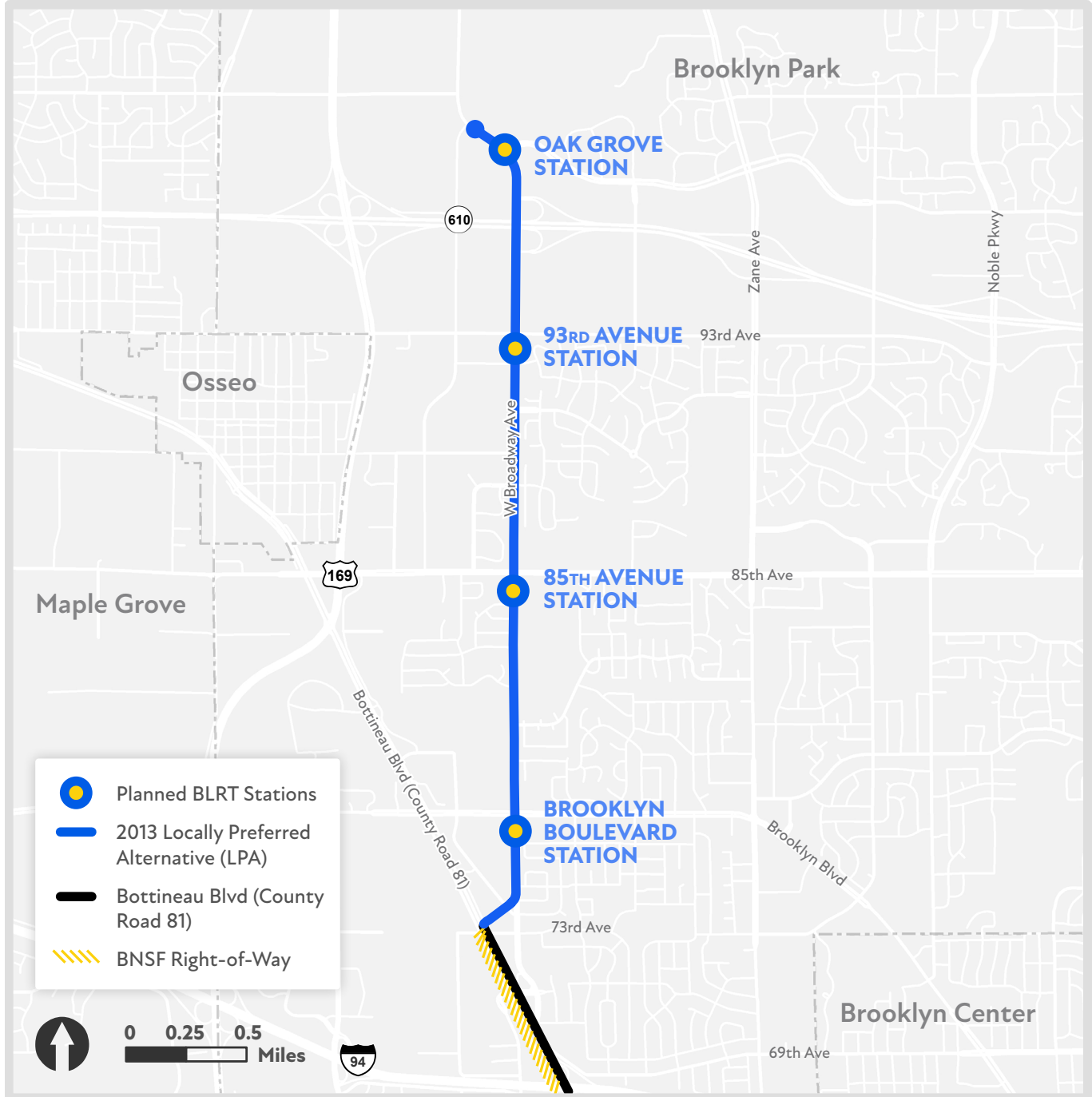
After the initial review, two primary routes and various linking segments remained (see Figures 6 through 8 for routes under evaluation in Areas 1 through 3, respectively). The Lowry Route principally utilizes a combination of Lowry Avenue N and Washington Avenue N. The West Broadway Route utilizes West Broadway Avenue. The identified link segments collectively represent a variety of alternate ways to potentially route the BLRT between West Broadway Avenue and its terminus at the Target Field Station. The routes also reflect what has been identified as priority opportunities through community input received to date (see page 12).



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Figure 6: Planned and Potential Route for Evaluation in Area 1

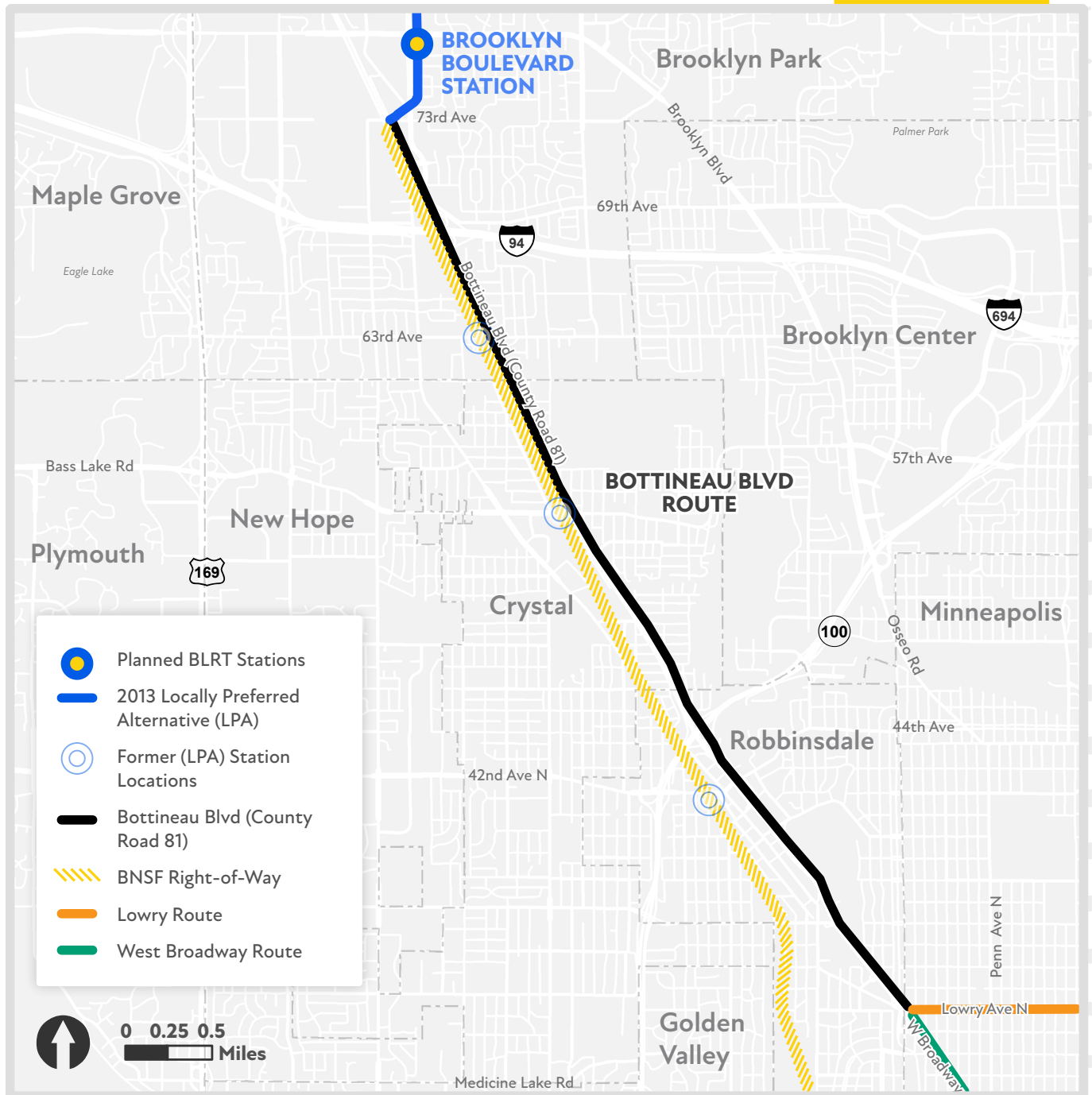
AREA 1



The route follows West Broadway Avenue in Brooklyn Park. Stations remain at Oak Grove, 93rd Avenue, 85th Avenue, and Brooklyn Boulevard.

Figure 7: Potential Route for Evaluation in Area 2

AREA 2



Project stakeholders identified the Bottineau Boulevard Route (County Road 81) as a potential focus of initial analysis in Area 2. How the roadway would be configured with LRT will be the focus of engineering work over the next year. The previous station areas are identified as they help inform efforts to place stations along Bottineau Boulevard (County Road 81).



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Figure 8: Potential Routes for Evaluation in Area 3



The primary suggestions for a route in Area 3 are along West Broadway Avenue or Lowry Avenue. There are multiple possible options to connect Target Field Station to either of the roadways. The main routes could serve the North Loop and commercial areas east of I-94 or the residential areas west of I-94.

We Want to Hear From You!



- What **opportunities** do you see?
- What **challenges** do you see?
- What routes do you most want to see advanced?
- Are we missing any route options that you think should be evaluated?

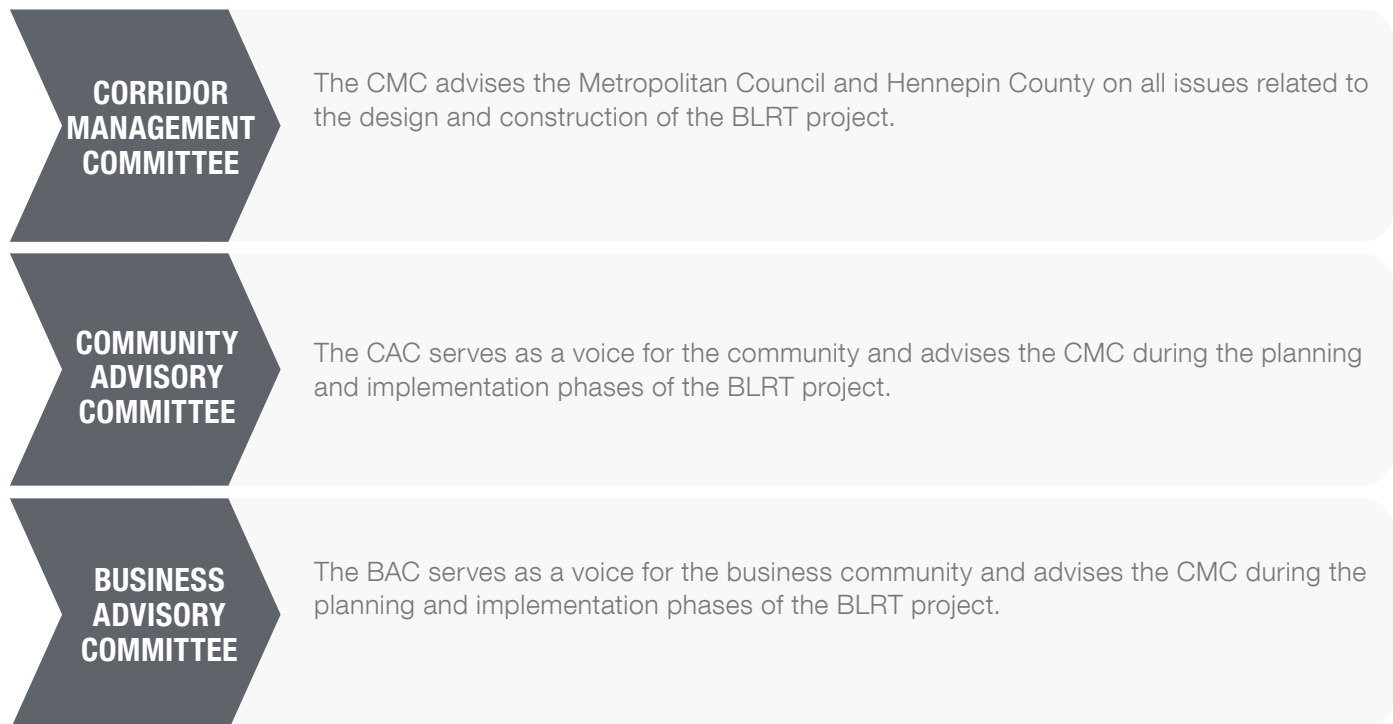
Local Decision-Making Process

To effectively move to the next step of identifying an improved route, the project has relied on the decision-making process initially identified in the FEIS. This includes the policymaker and stakeholder partners on the CAC, BAC, and CMC. These committees are composed of leaders from the corridor communities. Additional input has been sought from technical staff of the corridor cities through the Technical Project Advisory Committee (TPAC) and issue identification meetings with corridor communities.

ADVISORY COMMITTEE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS



Advisory committees are a key avenue by which the Metropolitan Council and Hennepin County receive public input. Project advisory committees enable the Metropolitan Council and Hennepin County to receive advice and feedback from policymakers, government entities and community groups, businesses, and citizens. Community dialogue and informed decision-making is supported through the work of the CMC, CAC, and BAC.





FTA Involvement

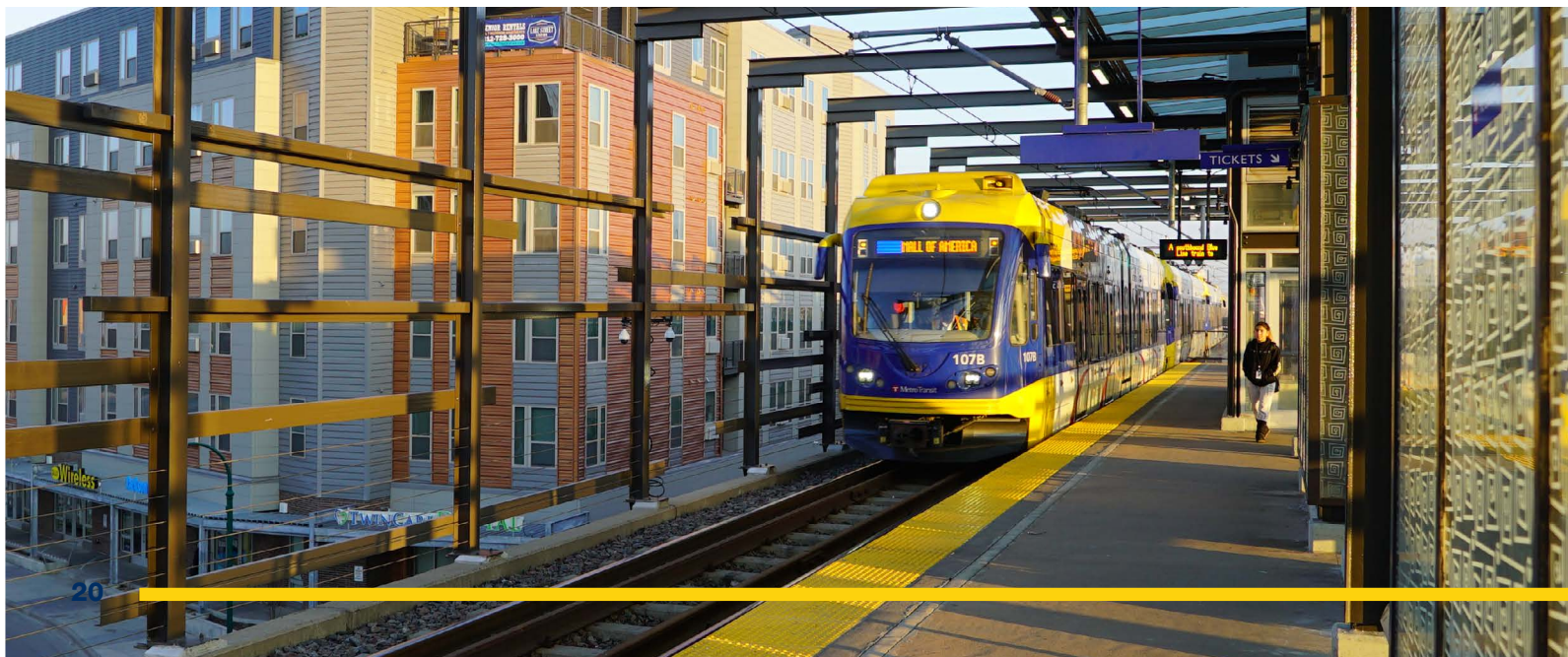
As reflected in the project timeline found on page 4 of this document, the BLRT project previously advanced through the required federal and state environmental processes. For this project, an EIS was required. At the federal level, FTA was the lead federal agency for the environmental review and is also a critical funding partner. As the project will be evaluating and ultimately advancing a route that does not use rail property, it is anticipated that future environmental analysis and documentation will be required, along with funding from FTA. Hence, ongoing communication and coordination with and approvals from FTA will be required during this process.

Previous Project Commitments

With the project modifications, the Metropolitan Council and Hennepin County recognize that related infrastructure improvements that are needed by the corridor communities may no longer be advanced as part of the BLRT project. Both agencies are committed to working at the local level with partners to continue to move these needed investments forward. The transit needs in previous station areas along Highway 55 and in Golden Valley also represent an opportunity to explore other options to improve transit for the communities.

Anti-Displacement and Community Wealth Building Efforts

The Metropolitan Council and Hennepin County are committed to delivering an LRT investment that benefits current corridor residents and businesses. In response to the feedback received during engagement efforts, both agencies are advancing efforts to form pathways to address leading community concerns about housing affordability, business support, and displacement. In addition to bringing tools from our own agencies, in the coming years the Metropolitan Council and Hennepin County will facilitate multi-agency and community partner efforts to address these issues head-on.



Project Goals

The collaborative development of Project Principles in December 2020 was an important milestone in the overall process. Building off the Project Principles, the initial route options have been developed based on preliminary technical input and are supported by input received from engagement activities. Additionally, the goals developed during the previous EIS process are included below. These goals have undergone an initial review and update by the Metropolitan Council and Hennepin County to reflect updates to the existing transit system as well as local and federal review requirements.

Goal 1: Improve transit access and connections to jobs and regional destinations.

Goal 2: Improve frequency and reliability of transit service to communities in the corridor.

Goal 3: Provide transit improvements that maximize transit benefits, while being cost competitive and economically viable.

Goal 4: Support communities' development goals.

Goal 5: Promote healthy communities and sound environmental practices including efforts to address climate change.

Goal 6: Advance local and regional equity and work towards reducing regional racial disparities.

We Want to Hear From You!



- Are there specific project goals you most support?
- Are there goals we have missed?

Next Steps

We look forward to discussing this information at upcoming virtual town halls scheduled for:

📅 **March 25, 2021**, 6:00-7:30 PM

📅 **March 30, 2021**, 12:00-1:00 PM & 6:00-7:30 PM

Input received will be reviewed and considered by the BLRT advisory committees and will inform the updates to the BLRT project goals, development of specific evaluation criteria, and the initial screening of route options. By the end of 2021, the project team aims to have a new route option that has the support of corridor residents, businesses, and cities. The preferred route will then be advanced for further environmental analysis and engineering activities.

Can't Make the Virtual Town Halls?

Visit [BlueLineExt.org](https://www.metrotransit.org/blue-line-ext) to provide comments, take a survey, or connect with project staff.

For project questions or to invite us to attend an event contact Sophia Ginis at sophia.ginis@metrotransit.org, or 651-592-1911.

