

Responses to Community Questions

Minneapolis Town Hall Community Meeting, Jan. 7, 2014

The Metropolitan Council held facilitated public town hall community meetings on January 7 & 9, 2014 focused on studies that are currently underway of freight rail, water resources and landscaping/greenscaping in the Kenilworth area of Minneapolis. The Council received more than 120 comments at the Jan. 7 Minneapolis meeting. The following responds to the most frequently asked questions and common concerns.

1. Why are other LRT routes no longer being considered?

The route of the Southwest LRT line was selected through a public process to identify a Locally Preferred Alternative (LPA) for transit improvements in the Southwest Corridor. This process ended with the selection of the route (known as the “3A” alternative) and mode (light rail transit). At the conclusion of this process, the Metropolitan Council voted to add the LPA to the region’s 2030 Transportation Policy Plan. In 2012, the five cities along the route joined Hennepin County in passing resolutions of support.

Subsequent events following approval of the LPA, such as the Federal Transit Administration’s 2011 directive to incorporate freight rail location into the scope of the Southwest LRT Project, added cost and complexity to the project. It is not uncommon for the FTA to condition their project approvals based on their assessment of the project. The addition of freight rail does not remove the issues associated with other LRT route options, such as costs and construction impacts.

From initial studies more than two decades ago through the Southwest Transitway Alternatives Analysis (completed by Hennepin County in 2006) and the release of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement by Hennepin County and the Metropolitan Council in 2012, options for improving transit in the Southwest Corridor have been examined through a process that has included public input on key decisions. Since becoming the lead agency for Southwest LRT in 2013, the Metropolitan Council has continued to study the LPA in order to avoid, minimize or mitigate impacts on local communities.

Going “back to the drawing board” and abandoning the LPA – rather than working through the challenges facing the project – would put at risk the region’s continued progress toward creating a world-class transit network and jeopardize the project’s position in the federal funding process.

The Southwest LRT Project is a large and complex undertaking – one that offers profound long-term benefits to the region in terms of mobility, congestion relief and economic development. As the region’s population grows in the coming decades and businesses look to locate in areas with strong multi-modal transportation networks to support their workforces, Southwest LRT will bolster the region’s economic competitiveness. And for the growing number of Twin Cities



residents searching for ways to do more while driving less, LRT is a convenient, economical and environmentally friendly option.

One LRT route option that continues to generate discussion is the Midtown Greenway-Nicollet Avenue route through Uptown. This option was rejected due to higher construction costs and unacceptable impacts on the surrounding neighborhoods. However, this area remains a strong candidate for other transit improvements, and in October 2013 the Minneapolis City Council voted to adopt modern streetcars as the preferred transit improvement along Nicollet and Central Avenues. Streetcars would provide better service than LRT on Nicollet because streetcars make more frequent stops (like the current bus service) and share roads with cars (unlike LRT, which requires dedicated right-of-way) while still providing economic benefits and attracting new riders.

The Metropolitan Council is committed to moving forward with Southwest LRT, building on the work already done by Hennepin County and other project partners who evaluated many alternatives and selected the Locally Preferred Alternative as the best proposal to meet the region's future transportation needs.

Southwest LRT route selection timeline

- 2006:** Hennepin County completes the Southwest Transitway Alternatives Analysis, a study of several possible routes and modes (bus or rail) to improve transit service in the Southwest Corridor.
- 2009:** Hennepin County Regional Railroad Authority (HCRRA) recommends a Locally Preferred Alternative of light rail along the "3A" route.
- 2010:** Metropolitan Council votes to incorporate the LPA into the 2030 regional transportation plan.
- 2011:** Federal Transit Administration approves the Southwest LRT Project to enter the Engineering phase and stipulates that the project include freight rail location as part of its scope.
- 2012:** Local governments along the LPA and Hennepin County pass resolutions in support of the LPA. HCRRA and the Metropolitan Council publish the Draft Environmental Impact Statement for the project, including input from the public, local governments, and state and federal agencies.

2. Why are other modes of transit not being considered?

Both light rail transit (LRT) and bus system improvements including bus rapid transit (BRT) were considered for the Southwest Transitway during the Alternatives Analysis, which was completed in 2006. Based on the findings of the Alternatives Analysis and the recommendation of the Hennepin County Regional Railroad Authority, the Metropolitan Council selected LRT as the preferred mode in 2010. All five cities along the route and Hennepin County passed resolutions in support of the Locally Preferred Alternative of LRT along the current route. The Hennepin County Regional

Railroad Authority and the Metropolitan Council also examined bus system improvements as part of the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) process, and found the LRT remained the best mode choice for the project.

Light rail transit service has seating or carrying capacity and trip reliability advantages over bus service. For trips between certain destinations, light rail transit service also has travel time advantages over bus service. In contrast to commuter bus service, LRT serves multiple markets along the length of the rail line. LRT is also better able to accommodate the needs of “reverse commuters” who travel from homes in the central city to jobs in communities along the Southwest Corridor. By extending the Green Line, LRT will provide a rapid, one-seat ride between downtown St. Paul, the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis and the Southwest Corridor communities that would not be feasible using buses.

3. Why was the deep bore tunnel eliminated from consideration and how were costs determined?

The Southwest LRT Corridor Management Committee recommended eliminating the “deep bore” LRT tunnel option in the Kenilworth area based on an evaluation of costs and construction impacts at its September 4, 2013 meeting. Total costs of the deep bore tunnel option were estimated at \$320 – 330 million, compared to \$150 – 160 million for the shallow tunnel option.

Costs for a deep bore tunnel were determined by following FTA guidelines and established engineering practices for cost estimation, which take into account construction and design related expenditures. Constructing a deep bore tunnel would be expensive because it requires specialized tunnel boring equipment as well as the excavation of large pits for the boring equipment. These excavation pits, located at both ends of the tunnel would produce large amounts of soil and other materials that would have to be trucked away during the boring operation, disrupting surrounding neighborhoods and businesses. The construction of the deep bore tunnel would require that the West Lake Street Bridge be removed and rebuilt to accommodate the southern excavation pit in order to avoid taking private homes; as a result, traffic would be detoured through neighborhoods, and construction would cause detours and traffic slowdowns in the area around Calhoun Village for approximately one year.

4. Who is being served in Minneapolis with the current LRT route and what is the benefit to the city?

Southwest LRT will include four or five new stations in Minneapolis – at West Lake Street, Penn Avenue, Van White, Royalston Boulevard and at 21st Street (if LRT is built at surface level rather than underground through Kenilworth) – and will join the Green Line at Target Field Station.

Minneapolis residents living west of Downtown will be able to take a one-seat ride east to Downtown jobs, shopping and theaters, to the University of Minnesota and to St. Paul destinations like the Ordway Theater and the new St. Paul Saints ballpark in historic Lowertown.

Residents of North Minneapolis will be served by Royalston and Van White stations, and by connecting bus routes. By encouraging redevelopment around Royalston and Van White, Southwest LRT will increase the tax base and provide new housing and job opportunities on underutilized industrial sites.

From southern and eastern Minneapolis, residents will be able to reach many destinations within the city by continuing on the Green Line or by transferring from the Blue Line at Target Field Station, including: the Chain of Lakes and its surrounding trail network, Minneapolis Farmers' Market, West Lake Street shops and restaurants, Target Field and Target Center.

Residents throughout Minneapolis will enjoy new transit access to jobs in rapidly developing business centers in St. Louis Park, Hopkins, Minnetonka and Eden Prairie. These areas are already experiencing strong job growth, which is expected to continue in the future.

Routing LRT along Nicollet Avenue and through Uptown was considered during the route selection process and eliminated (see response to Question 1). Minneapolis is currently studying modern streetcars as a transit improvement for Nicollet Avenue. Adding LRT to areas already well served by several bus routes would not significantly increase local residents' transportation options; instead, LRT would compete with bus transit. Because LRT makes fewer stops than buses or streetcars, light rail would not be able to replace bus or streetcar service. The likely result would be redundancy and inefficient use of transit dollars.

5. If the shallow tunnel design in Kenilworth is advanced, will the construction method be able to preserve the characteristics of the corridor, and how much of the area can be replanted?

The shallow tunnels would be completely covered with soil and topped with the trail and vegetation. The Southwest LRT Project is currently preparing an accelerated inventory of trees in the Corridor, and will provide this information when available. Similar tree studies will be performed at sensitive sites along the LRT alignment before construction. Once a decision has been made on the Project scope and budget, the Metropolitan Council anticipates involving the public in the process of landscaping and replanting, in order to ensure that the final result preserves the area's unique character while accommodating LRT.

6. How will the water resources evaluation ensure no damage to our lakes or groundwater?

Safeguarding the lakes, waterways and groundwater of the Twin Cities region is part of the mission of the Metropolitan Council. The independent water resources evaluation now underway is just one of many measures taken by the Council to protect the region's water resources. The evaluation includes reviewing previous reports and documents related to water resources in the Kenilworth Corridor area and evaluating the proposed design and water monitoring program for the shallow

LRT tunnels. The study's activities are being coordinated with the Minnehaha Creek Watershed District, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, Hennepin County and the City of Minneapolis.

The walls of the shallow LRT tunnels would be designed and constructed to minimize seepage, and any water that infiltrates the tunnel would be treated in accordance to environmental protection requirements. The independent water resources evaluation includes a review of the Metropolitan Council's plans for handling water should it enter into the shallow LRT tunnels.

The Southwest LRT Project will obtain permits for construction from the local watershed districts and follow their regulations. On-site monitoring of the adjacent lakes and groundwater will be performed regularly during construction, and construction methods will be employed that protect waterways and groundwater from excess runoff or contamination. The Council will also monitor adjacent lakes and groundwater in the Corridor once the shallow LRT tunnels are in operation.

7. Why was the 21st Street Station removed?

An underground station, which would be necessary if shallow LRT tunnels were constructed through the Kenilworth Corridor, would require elevators and a ventilation system not required by an above-ground station. This would add cost to the construction and ongoing maintenance of the shallow LRT tunnels. Projected ridership at this station was not sufficient to justify the expense of building an underground station at 21st Street.

8. How are ridership numbers developed, and do the numbers include people switching from buses?

Metro Transit projects future transit ridership using a travel demand model for the entire Twin Cities metropolitan area. The model takes into account the number of people who switch from buses to light rail. The model conforms to federal requirements for modeling travel demand and also includes features that allow more accurate prediction of travel in the Twin Cities region. When the model is updated, ridership estimates can change in response to the new data. To learn more about the travel demand model and how it is used to estimate future transit ridership, see Chapter 6 of the Southwest Transitway Draft Environmental Impact Statement, available on the Project website (www.swlrt.org).

The Southwest LRT Project generates new ridership estimates at key project milestones to ensure that plans for the route keep up to date with changes in the Twin Cities region. The next update of ridership estimates will occur when the Project applies for Federal Transit Administration approval to enter the Engineering phase. Initial ridership estimates were generated during the Alternatives Analysis, which was completed in 2006, based on household data from the 2000 Census. Updated estimates for the Locally Preferred Alternative were created in 2010, when the Metropolitan Council added Southwest LRT to the regional transportation plan and made an initial application for federal funding; these estimates continued to rely on 2000 Census data, because the relevant 2010 Census data were not yet available. Future ridership estimates will incorporate data from the

2010 Census as well as from the Metropolitan Council's most recent Travel Behavior Inventory, conducted from 2010 to 2012.

9. Was \$300 million added to the project budget to mitigate impacts in Eden Prairie?

The selection of the route in Eden Prairie was based on ridership and access to jobs, not on mitigating negative impacts. Multiple route alternatives were examined before the Locally Preferred Alternative (LPA) route for Southwest LRT was selected (as discussed in Question 1). The cost of one Eden Prairie alternative, which continued roughly southwest from Shady Oak Station along the trail instead of turning south, was estimated to be roughly \$300 million less than the cost of the LPA. However, that alignment went through primarily low-density residential areas, which resulted in low ridership projections and was not compatible with city comprehensive plans. In contrast, the LPA serves more people, and connects to destinations including Eden Prairie Town Center and the Eden Prairie Center Mall, and offers more opportunities for development near stations. The LPA also serves the Opus and Golden Triangle office and industrial developments with nearly 30,000 total jobs, and the new UnitedHealth Group campus at City West Station that will employ more than 6,500 workers when complete; the rejected Eden Prairie route did not serve any of these important job centers.

10. Will having both freight rail and LRT in the Kenilworth Corridor compromise safe access to the stations and bike paths?

All Southwest LRT stations are designed with safe connections to trails and sidewalks. For example, the design of the West Lake Station will incorporate vertical circulation via stairs and elevators from the West Lake Street Bridge to provide an easy and safe connection to the both the station and the Kenilworth trail. Where the trail crosses both freight and LRT tracks, such as near Penn Station, the design includes a bridge for pedestrians and bicyclists to cross over the tracks. The safety of transit customers and the residents of surrounding areas is the Metropolitan Council's top priority. All design and engineering decisions on the Southwest LRT Project are made with safety in mind.