Responses to Community Questions

St. Louis Park Town Hall Community Meeting, Jan. 9, 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. 9 St. Louis Park meeting. The following responds to the most frequently asked questions and common concerns.

1. Why are reroute options in St. Louis Park still being considered when some have already been deemed unsafe?

In response to community concerns, the Metropolitan Council authorized an independent study of freight rail relocation alternatives. The scope of this study includes reviewing all previous work on freight rail relocation in the project area, including freight rail reroute options that have previously been rejected by freight rail operators and, potentially, new alternatives identified by the consultant.

The Southwest LRT Project employs engineers and consultants who are experienced in freight rail issues; all design concepts conform to safety regulations and sound engineering practices.

2. Why are the shallow tunnels the proposed option for the Kenilworth Corridor, and why isn't elevating or moving the bike trails still being considered?

The Southwest LRT Project Office's proposed shallow LRT tunnels design concept, currently under evaluation, represents an option that is feasible to build and best addresses community concerns. During discussions of LRT in the Kenilworth Corridor, the community expressed its preference for design alternatives that did not require the acquisition of homes, and also supported keeping bike trails in the Corridor. Because the existing right-of-way is not wide enough to accommodate freight rail, LRT and trails side-by-side at ground level without taking homes, the Metropolitan Council looked at five additional alternatives within the Corridor: putting LRT in either deep or shallow tunnels and keeping freight and trails at ground level, rerouting the trails, elevating the LRT trains and keep the trails next to freight or elevating the trails and building LRT tracks next to freight rail tracks.

Both types of tunnel designs would minimize the noise impacts of LRT operation and help preserve the existing character of the surrounding area. Compared to a deep bore tunnel, shallow tunnels are less expensive to construct and would result in fewer construction impacts on the surrounding area because removal and reconstruction of the West Lake Street Bridge would not be required.

A design concept for elevated trails was one of the possible technical solutions presented by Southwest LRT design staff. Objections to this concept included visual impacts and difficulties getting on and off the trails, especially in emergencies. The Southwest LRT Corridor Management Committee also did not support advancing the elevated trails or trail relocation options.

3. Will the same level of study be conducted in St. Louis Park as Minneapolis in regards to landscaping/vegetation and water resources analyses?

The Metropolitan Council authorized an accelerated tree inventory in the Kenilworth Corridor in response to the concerns of local residents. Similar analysis will be performed along the entire LRT alignment within sensitive areas identified by the cities and the community. The Metropolitan Council is working on Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) documentation, which will evaluate environmental impacts of the proposed project on parks, wetlands, water resources, and other areas of concern.

4. When will a decision be made to fully remove reroute options from consideration?

A decision on freight rail location will be made as part of setting the scope and budget for the Southwest LRT Project. After the independent freight rail relocation analysis and water resources evaluation are complete and the consultants have delivered final reports in early March 2014, the Southwest LRT Corridor Management Committee will review the findings and make a recommendation on scope and budget to the Metropolitan Council. The Council will review the reports and CMC recommendation and will take public testimony before taking action to set the project scope and budget.

5. How are the impacts of freight rail location on the quality of the schools going to be analyzed or mitigated?

Proximity to schools is one of the metrics being analyzed in the freight rail relocation study. The independent consultant attended the January 7 and 9 town hall community meetings, where members of the public provided input into the metrics regarding safety. As an independent consultant, the firm conducting the study will determine the best method to evaluate the metrics it uses based in part on the input from the community meetings. Policy makers will take these factors into account when making a final decision about the project scope.

6. How will the impacts on community cohesion and livability of a possible reroute be considered in the freight rail location study?

Community members provided input on community cohesion impacts at the January 7 and 9 town hall community meetings, which the independent consultant attended. The consultant will factor

the input into its analysis. Policy makers will take these factors into account when making a final decision about the project scope.

7. Will the safety elements of the freight rail relocation study report be reviewed first by the railroads?

The consultant performing the freight rail relocation study has met with representatives of the freight rail companies during the study in order to gather information about current and future freight rail operations and railroad design criteria for track curvature and grade requirements, which relates directly to safety. Freight rail operators will have the opportunity to review and comment on the draft report, including methodology and findings at the same time as the rest of the general public.

8. How are existing conditions being used in the evaluation of freight rail routing options?

In addition to reviewing previous plans and studies of freight rail relocation options, the independent freight rail consultant will tour the freight rail corridors to document existing conditions. The freight rail relocation study will compare existing conditions (including proximity to schools and homes, pedestrian and auto crossings and other factors) to alternatives under study.

9. How will auto access and traffic be considered?

The metrics used in the freight rail location study include safety evaluations of at-grade road crossings and at-grade pedestrian crossings as well as impacts on community cohesion.

10. How will safety of a chosen freight rail route be ensured?

Safety is a top priority of the Metropolitan Council. The Southwest LRT Project will ensure that all decisions related to freight rail comply with federal railroad safety regulations and also represent sound engineering practice. The Metropolitan Council will work with communities, neighborhoods, the business community and freight rail operators as the engineering process advances to ensure the project is addressing safety concerns.