

Southwest LRT Bassett Creek Valley Working Group Report and Recommendations

December 19, 2017

The Southwest LRT Bassett Creek Valley Working Group met on December 19, 2017 and those present agreed on the following:

Intent

The Southwest LRT Bassett Creek Valley Working Group (Working Group) was established to provide guidance on the aesthetic treatment of the corridor protection wall along the portion of the Wayzata Substation to be shared by freight rail and the Southwest LRT (Project).

- The purpose of the Working Group has been to serve as a voice for the community and provide focused input to the Metropolitan Council and its consultants on design treatments for the wall.
- Appointees to the Working Group included some members of the previous Kenilworth Landscape Design Committee in an effort to encourage continuity in both the process and outcomes.
- The Working Group also included representatives from the Bryn Mawr neighborhood to provide an opportunity for input from people likely to be directly affected by the addition of the wall.
- The Working Group agreed to a set of roles and responsibilities and followed the design principles earlier applied successfully to the Kenilworth Corridor Landscape Design.

Working Group members expressed significant concerns about the sudden and late addition of the wall to the project.

- While the aesthetics of a wall were a major concern, there were numerous environmental questions raised by this new feature of the Project.
- The Working Group highlighted and questioned impacts on the Bryn Mawr neighborhood immediately adjacent to the wall.
- Besides unknown visual and noise impacts, Working Group members pointed out that the wall will present a substantial barrier to the passage of people and wildlife.
- The Working Group pointed out that the wall will add a visual divide between North and South areas of Minneapolis, emphasizing a social divide that is already a major concern.

The Working Group maintained a productive and collaborative relationship with Project Staff and consultants.

- This extended from the establishment of design principles to the review of the final design proposal.
- The Working Group has been insistent that construction of the wall promote a healthy ecosystem and pleasing environment for the adjacent park (Bryn Mawr Meadows), the Bryn Mawr neighborhood, riders of the SWLRT and those who use the trails.

The Working Group urged the Project Staff to include features in the plan to improve the corridor and extend design concepts from the Kenilworth corridor into the area under review.

- If the wall must be built, it should be designed and constructed in such a way that it adds enhancement to the Project and takes advantage of opportunities to enhance the corridor and areas on both sides of the wall.
- The Working Group intended that design of wall and adjacent features, especially in the eastern portion, improve the features of the corridor impaired by industrial use and neglect.
- The Working Group, besides addressing features specific to the design of the wall, urged that this opportunity be taken to improve the current level of enjoyment and use of the trail corridor as well as enhance the landscape character and quality of the area on both sides of the wall.

Outcomes

The overview of railroad negotiations with BNSF provided by Project Staff, emphasized their conviction that the wall must be built.

- Certain design features of the wall, such as its height, thickness and continuity were being insisted upon by BNSF.
- The railroad is insisting on the wall, as described, as part of an agreement to provide use of their land, as required by the SWLRT Project.

Members of the Working Group toured the area under review on numerous occasions, seeing first-hand where the wall would be constructed and how it related to the adjacent landscape.

- The field observations assisted in visualizing height and distance of the wall, elevation changes and current conditions of the corridor.
- In addition, a public open house was conducted to receive input from community members.
- Design aspects of the wall commented on by those attending the open house were given special consideration and addressed in the final design recommendations of the Working Group.

The issue of small animal crossing was reviewed at length, including a proposed design for such a crossing.

- The Working Group observed that the difference in elevation between the sides of the wall made it unlikely that any passage allowing for small animal crossing would be used.
- It was observed that any resources spent on such passages would be better applied to improving other features of the wall.

A range of other environmental impacts likely to result from constructing the wall are still under consideration and need to be addressed.

- Project Staff have indicated that the Metropolitan Council will prepare a Supplemental Environmental Assessment (SEA) related to the addition of the wall in accordance with federal National Environmental Policy Act requirements.
- The Metropolitan Council also has determined that it will prepare an Environmental Assessment Worksheet (EAW) in accordance with the Minnesota Environmental Policy Act.

The Working Group has reviewed and provided input into many design aspects of the wall and surrounding landscape, as presented by Project Staff and their consultants.

- This includes suggested locations for various aesthetic wall treatments, landscaping and historic interpretive elements.
- The Working Group reviewed textures, graphics, colors and plantings before offering a consensus on these features.
- Design of the wall is intended to be different for situations where it will be viewed from a distance or close-up, such as the stations.

The consensus of the Working Group includes the use of a dark color for the wall, and liberal planting of vines.

- The focus for most of the wall should be to make the wall recede into the landscape and not be a highly visible feature.
- Maintenance of the wall and keeping it free from graffiti was a frequently expressed concern.
- The Project Staff should establish a large supply of touch-up paint to serve in future years, and design of the wall should accommodate easy touch-up.

While the aesthetics of the wall as seen from the LRT side have been given abundant consideration, the impact of the wall on the adjacent park (Bryn Mawr Meadows), and the Bryn Mawr neighborhood is largely unresolved.

- The major features of the wall involving texture and color have been reviewed, and it is expected that vines planted along the wall will soften the wall impact in certain times of year.
- In addition, the Working Group is requesting that the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board address impacts on the adjacent park (Bryn Mawr Meadows) and the Bryn Mawr neighborhood side of the wall in their planning process now underway.
- The Working Group recommends that an aggressive plan be prepared to provide visual shielding on the freight rail side of the wall.
- This would include a rich variety of plantings and provide a benefit to users of the park and members of the neighborhood.
- In addition to providing visual shielding from the wall, such an action would also add a visual shield to the industrial corridor currently occupied by freight rail.

The eastern portion of the wall will go through an area currently impaired by industrial use and neglect, offering an opportunity to improve the quality of experience for trail users and LRT riders.

- While the wall is largely an unwelcome feature being added to the Project, it does offer favorable shielding from the industrial corridor currently occupied by freight rail.
- Users of the trails and riders of the LRT will have a distraction from the industrial use by freight rail.
- The wall and its associated landscaping can provide a possible benefit for those who use the SWLRT corridor, particularly at the eastern end before Minneapolis downtown, and full advantage should be taken of this opportunity.