

Minutes of the REGULAR MEETING OF THE TAAC COMMITTEE

Wednesday, January 5, 2022

Committee Members Present: Chair David Fenley, Vice Chair Darrell Paulsen, Sam Jasmine, Patsy Murphy, Ken Rodgers, Kari Sheldon, Rachel Garaghty, Claudia Fuglie, Patty Thorsen, Diane Graham-Raff, Erik Henricksen and Richard Rowan.

Committee Members Absent: Christopher Bates, Jeffrey Dains, Heidi Myhre and Trevor Turner.

Committee Members Excused: none.

Council Staff Present: Jason Tintes, Bre Grand, Andy Streasick, Leslie Kandaras, Guthrie Byard, Doug Cook, Christine Kuennen, Fadumo Mohamed, Brooke Bordson and Alison Coleman

Public Present: none.

CALL TO ORDER

A quorum being present, Committee Chair Fenley called the regular meeting of the Council's TAAC Committee to order at 12:32 p.m. on Wednesday, January 5, 2022.

APPROVAL OF AGENDA AND MINUTES

It was moved by Fuglie, seconded by Graham-Raff to approve the agenda. **Motion carried.**

It was moved by Vice Chair Paulsen, seconded by Jasmine to approve the minutes of the December 1, 2021, regular meeting of the TAAC Committee. **Motion carried.**

BUSINESS & INFORMATION

1. Aira Pilot

Chair Fenley said Aira is a service for people who are low vision or blind. It is essentially guidance through your phone camera. You call in to a person who would then access the camera on your phone and then they will essentially tell you everything that is in the field of view and work with you in getting you around.

Bre Grand, Project Management Specialist, Transit Information, Metro Transit, spoke to the TAAC committee. I use : She/her pronouns. I have brown hair that is in a bun today. I am wearing a red sweater and glasses. I am coming to you from my spare bedroom/makeshift office in South Minneapolis. I am here today to give an update on our ongoing pilot and test the Aira app. Aira is a live stream wayfinding and navigation app for low vision or blind customers. We started the pilot period in June of last year. So I wanted to give a little background about the project itself and then a status update.

Next slide. The reason that we are testing this technology is that we know that lack of wayfinding is already a customer pain point, and it particularly impacts blind and low vision transit customers. There can be safety challenges. Particularly when there are unexpected things like construction or poor weather and it can be difficult to identify certain boarding locations especially at transit centers with many stops or locations where a stop is in the middle of the block, for example.

Our Transit Information Center Representatives do provide live assistant by phone to low vision and blind customers. And they use tools such as Google Street View to help with that. But they can't video chat with them or actually see the current street conditions. We know that there are still some gaps and the capabilities that we have to provide accessible and reliable information for our low vision and blind customers.

Next slide. Because of this need or this gap that we have. We have been piloting the use of the Aira app service. Customers can access Aira through an app on their mobile device, which uses their camera. And the speaker on the mobile device actually connects them to an Aira agent, who is trained in navigation assistance. Who can see their surroundings and provide them with guidance and other assistance as needed?

Next slide. Aira has been used by other Twin Cities agencies like the MSP Airport, The City of Minneapolis, and it has been tested by some other agencies such as the Boston Area Transit Agency.

Next slide. We started the Aira Pilot in June of last year. It will continue until the end of March of this year. During that pilot period, the way that we have it set up is any customer that is interested can use Aira assistance for free when they are using it for their Metro Transit trip. By selecting our free offer within the app or telling the Aira agent when they call Aira from the app, that they want to use Metro Transit's free offer. This includes door-to-door service. And we also have some geo-fencing set up at some of our larger facilities such as the Mall of America Transit Station. So, if customers already happen to have the Aira app, they may also get push notifications about our free offer when they are at those locations.

Next slide. When the pilot ends at the end of March, what we will be doing is soliciting feedback from customers that have used the service. We will hold some focus groups before the beginning of the pilot to get feedback about current navigation challenges. We will be holding follow-up focus groups in April. We also plan to create and send out an electronic survey to various community groups that we have been working with to share with their members and customers for any additional feedback from those who may have used the service but may not have participated in the focus groups.

Next slide. After we gain that feedback, we will be developing an evaluation report in April based on user feedback and the usage of the service so that we can provide a recommendation about whether we are to continue with it longer term.

Next slide. Since the beginning of the pilot and even before the pilot started. Last year, we have been working with various community groups to get the word out before the beginning of the pilot, that try to get the word out about the free offer. And gained usage. We cannot get that feedback that we desire. So we have been using various tactics such as social media, electronic newsletters, media stories such as the Star Tribune, working with KFAI Disability and Progress Radio Show. Communicating with organizations like Vision Loss Resources. State Services for the Blind, and Metro Mobility, to distribute through their communication channels. To help spread the word about this.

Next slide. So it is difficult for us to have an idea about how many people may use this service. We don't have extremely robust information about our statistics. About how many customers who identify as blind or low vision who frequently use this service. So we weren't exactly sure how many to expect as far as usage. The pandemic, of course, was another factor. But, so far, the average sessions per month have been about 30. And we have had about 20 unique users so far. So as mentioned, we know that people are still in flux with their potential transit use because of the pandemic and there are a number of factors that have limited some of the use of this service. But we are still hoping for as much feedback as possible. So, why not continue spreading the word and letting people know about the free offer over the next few months until the pilot ends at the end of March?

That concludes my update on the project. I wanted to leave some time for any questions.

Jasmine said I have been on this committee, and I think I asked a question there, but I don't think I got an answer. It was my understanding that if there was enough usage that this might be something that would be put in the works that would stay, possibly. So my question is did I misunderstand? And my second question would be if that is the case, how much usage would it take to apply something like that?

Grand said Metro Transit has a contract with Aira. The way it is structured is that we have this pilot or testing period and then we do have the option to extend, based on our evaluation recommendations. We did not set a specific threshold for usage for a multitude of reasons. One of course the pandemic and the unknowns related to that. Another being the fact that we unfortunately don't have great data about the average use of Metro Transit by a customer that can be identified as blind or low vision. So, it is hard for us to set a baseline to compare it to. So we will want to take the usage to consideration. But the greatest input into our evaluation will be the user feedback from those who use the service and provide us with information about whether or not they felt it helped improve their feeling of safety, reduce barriers to using Metro Transit, etc.

Vice Chair Paulsen said does this apply to Metro Mobility as well? And if it does, or does not, can it at some point? Then also, as far as I know, there are many low vision transit users that don't know about this. We have members of our own committee that were instrumental in using this pilot at the airport and so forth. The value. I see the importance of this. So I can see why we want to extend it. But as far as getting the numbers and getting the raw data, I think it needs to be more widely publicized. Maybe it was publicized and maybe it wasn't. Not at the right time or not at the right location.

Grand said the contract with Aira service is with Metro Transit specifically. We have been working with Metro Mobility to help get the word out to Metro Mobility customers about this. Because we do know that many of the Metro Mobility customers have conditional eligibility, and we are hoping that providing Aira as a supplemental service for Metro Transit use might make some of those customers more willing or feel more comfortable or safe using fixed transit service.

Then to address the comments related to getting the word out. It is always challenging to know what is the best avenue. We do have a number of community groups and social media.

Rodgers said I have personally seen advertisement in Metro Transit correspondence and newsletters. I have also seen this mentioned in individual email notifications that have gone out to mailing lists. I would personally put this on the blind list, for the blind community. And it has appeared in articles in blind newsletters. I have not seen it however, in Access Press. I think it would be a valuable tool to use if somebody could do a guest short article and send it to Access Press. They are always looking for content appropriate for the disability community. That is wide audience. That is one thing I would like to suggest. But I would also echo what Sam identified. I, under normal circumstance, I would use the bus and the train for my daily commute to work. But because we are in Covid, we are on remote work reporting right now. And we are going to continue that for the foreseeable future.

A lot of state agencies that employ individuals with disabilities, are not working. So I personally, am not using public transportation. And I am not going out publicly, very much at all. Because of Covid. I know that there are many, many, people in the blind community that are following that same process. So the numbers, right now, it is unfortunate that it is hitting at this particular moment that when we are evaluating the program based on usage, when most of us are not using a normal process that we would normally use. But based on the airport experience and I have been involved with Aira at the airport since it's inception. The philosophy that we have taken at the airport to determine the value of offering Aira for patrons of the airport is that if it is used, even a little bit, it is of value to somebody that needs it. I would encourage, during your evaluation, that you really consider that as well. I know I have used it when we had less Covid in the environment. I have used it to experience it using Aira. But I would just suggest that. That consideration be given extra weight, because we are not in a normal situation. There are a lot of people that are not doing what they normally otherwise do.

Grand said I have gotten the same feedback from others. But the pandemic situation and the lack of use of transit because of that. And so, agreed. We will be giving more weight to user feedback from the focus groups and surveys from folks who have been able to use the Aira service than simple numbers of service.

Chair Fenley said Ken, would it be safe to say that 30 times a month, that is being used right now, would be alone on transit?

Rodgers said absolutely.

Chair Fenley said under normal circumstances.

Rodgers said I also know from having conversations with other blind individuals in my circles. That people are specifically not doing what they would normally do. They are not going out for fear of being exposed to Covid. Even in our early time before Covid, when the City of Minneapolis identified Aira as an option for the Nicollet Mall area. the usage that we found from the City of Minneapolis usage of Aira. It was mostly people accessing transportation along Nicollet Mall. It wasn't people going shopping on Nicollet Mall. It was people using transit on the mall and they would key into the Aira app to be able to access information about the transit situations. I know that it is used by the community. I know it is valued. And I don't want that to get lost.

Jasmine said I just want to echo Ken's words that I too am one of those that would often take transit from Plymouth to Minneapolis. I am not anymore because of the pandemic. So, I would agree that there is a lot of people that I know that are not doing the same thing. Certainly, I would hope that even if it meant to suspending it a bit and it would not be picked up again or extending it well into the summer. Because I think that that is what is going to give you the best numbers.

My other question is could you remind me how in getting your data short of how you know that it is an impaired person? And lastly, it is kind of you going to extend this further? You are going to come off of the show again. I will let you comment.

Grand said yes, regarding the data that you are getting about the usage. Those are all reports that are coming from Aira. So they are logging people who call in and are using the free access offer that Metro Transit has within the app. I agree that is both you and Ken said it well. There are a lot of people that are not using transit right now because of the pandemic. We will be exploring different options. Because we are definitely trying to take that into consideration.

To your last question. I would be happy to come back on. Anytime.

Streasick said I am just thinking clarification as we notify our customers. I want to make sure that we are not operating at cross purposes. Metro Mobility staff has been operating under the assumption that while this was primarily designed for members of the low vision and blind communities, that other folks would be eligible for using it based on other disabilities that may impact the ability to navigate independently. Is that an erroneous assumption?

Grand said it is not erroneous. That is a good clarification. Thank you, Andy. Because the Aira service was primarily created for assisting blind or low vision customers. That is why we have been primarily communicating. But yes, anybody who wants to try the app for any purpose. Because they think that might be useful in assisting them. It is free to all customers during the pilot.

Murphy said could somebody explain a little bit better what this disability is and how it works out? When Andy was making his comment, I was thinking of myself. And like because I do not use the bus service because of my memory situation. Or I could get somewhere and go: "Where am I at and why am I here?" So if somebody could explain for me, That would be great.

Rodgers said I have another point to make so I think I could do both. And then you could fill in with what I am omitting or leaving out. Originally, the Aira program was designed and created primarily for blind and visually impaired individuals. Because what it is, is an app on your smart phone that you can immediately connect to a live individual that has access to your camera video and can see what you are pointing your camera to, to describe what is there. So for a blind person it is perfect. Because we can't see what is there. But a live person looking through my camera as I am listening to that person, I can identify and describe to me what they are seeing and help me navigate the environment safer. And it is the same for whoever uses it. But I do know that when Aira was created, it was specifically limited to individuals that use a white cane. Or have a guide dog.

So if the visual assistant that is there doesn't see a white cane or a guide dog and gets the impression that you are not a blind or visually impaired individual, they would stop providing the service. Especially when we went to this free five-minute program. So anybody can use it for five minutes for free. You don't have to be a subscriber. But to generally use Aira, it costs. So the individual buys a subscription and then those who have so many minutes to use their virtual assistant each month. But with this Metro Transit program, entities have the ability to purchase a block of minutes that individuals can use as a reasonable accommodation.

So for example, at the Minneapolis/Saint Paul airport, the Aira service is provided on the airport premises. Anywhere on the airport service, you can dial into Aira and it doesn't cost the individual anything. The airport picks up the cost, just like what Metro Transit is doing on rides on the transit system.

There are also corporations that purchase minutes. So Target is one of those. Walgreens is another one. Starbucks is another company. So I could go to any one of those and use Aira for free because those companies are paying for the minutes for accessibility to improve accessibility for their customers.

I do know that when we started this transit program, it was identified for anybody that needed assistance. Needed a second pair of eyes for whatever reason. So, Patsy, the idea that you might need it to help your memory, is a perfect example of a non-visual need and is something that could be quite helpful. In other words, when you started your trip. You could identify that you have a memory issue and here is what you want to do. Get that clearly understood so that the visual person understands. And then they can assist you with that. Then if you get stuck somewhere, and you get confused, they could help reorient you. So I think that's a great example of a different kind of use. And I just want to make sure that it is really clear to the people that perform the visual services at Aira, that it is also clarified with them. That in this program, we are allowing other than visually impaired individuals to use this program. I don't know if that is not even necessary at this point. That the program is now evolved to include that. Or if that is necessary. But I just wanted to point that out.

Grand said the Aira agents should be providing the service to any Metro Transit customer that calls in for any way it can assist them. So, if there are any concerns that come up, please feel free to reach out to me with that. Chair Fenley has my contact information. I am happy to share it with anyone here as well. I want to make sure that everything is running smoothly for everyone who is using the service.

Thorsen said you can lose the establishment of relationships and objects in your surroundings. Or as I think that Heidi, another member of this committee, said if things aren't consistently labeled out in the world. If green doesn't always mean "go", you could be in trouble. If you have thought processing issues. So I wonder if we need to be making or marketing in the best sense of the word, marketing so that people that do have the need for it but don't identify themselves. I tend to forget I have brain damage.

Chair Fenley said it is a very good point and I think it is designed and is strait forward when used by blind folks and folks with low vision. The potential or the possibility becomes a little more unique and more individualized when you talk about brain injury community or the developmental disability community or the intellectually disabled community. And I think the reason why Aira began as just blind because they didn't have the cultural awareness necessarily of those other communities and how to do it. But I think that is good that it is broadened out. I think that your point is spot on, Patty. How do we market that to folks who think that this is just for folks who are blind or have low vision? But it is a good point.

2. Infrastructure

Chair Fenley said Leslie will give us an overview here of how structure within Metro Transit might be changing because of Federal legislation.

Leslie Kandaras, Chief of Staff, Metro Transit, spoke to the TAAC committee. I work at Metro Transit as the Chief of Staff. I use she/her pronouns. I am going to start by providing just a bit of an overview of the Federal bipartisan infrastructure law. I was asked to say a few words about that legislation and the impact it is going to have on Metro Transit. I will just say at the onset that we are still waiting for a lot more information from the Federal government about what the implications will be. But I will share with you what we know. And offer to come back as we learn more.

Just for some context. Back in November, President Biden signed into law, the Bipartisan Infrastructure law. Its formal name is Infrastructure Investment in Job Act. Sometimes abbreviated IJJA. So you might see it referred to two different names, but this is the five-year package that authorizes \$1.2 trillion of infrastructure spending nationwide. That includes infrastructure spending for transportation needs, water treatment, broadband access and other priorities.

So it is a very large, expansive investment in our nation's infrastructure. Specifically for transit, the law authorizes up to \$108 billion for public transit nationwide during that five-year period. As of now, we anticipate that the State of Minnesota, so that is the state entirely, not specifically, the Met Council services. so we believe we stand to receive about \$800 million for transit as part of the five-year authorization package. So as I mentioned at this point in time, that we are still waiting for further information from the Federal Transit Administration about how that money is going to be allocated. We believe it is going to be a new mixture of formula, grants, in line with a previous authorization act where public transportation and there will also be some additional funding for competitive opportunities where we can apply for grants for federal programs that allow us to enhance our service.

So we continue to closely monitor information that is coming out from the Federal Transit Administration. But at this point we know that the bill is really focused on four main priorities. The first is safety. And this means enhancing state safety oversight programs and strengthening rail practices to protect transit workers and riders from injuries and ensure safe access to transit.

The second priority in the bill is modernization. Which refers to reducing state of good repair investments backlog by repairing an aging infrastructure. And by modernizing bus and the rail fleets.

The third priority in the bill revolves around climate. There is new funding in authorizing the legislature to replace thousands of transit buses nationwide with cleaner vehicles.

The fourth priority is guiding the investments in this legislation is equity. Improving transit service for communities that have historically had more limited access to transit. At this point we don't know how much money Metro Transit will receive. We don't have the details about the formulas or the rules around that funding. But we are very eager to learn more about it and we will continue to monitor it as the Federal Transit

Administration prepares to disperse that funding. As I said before, in the beginning, certainly if this committee is interested in receiving updates as we receive updates, I would be more than happy to come back as we learn more and can speak with more specificity about what this new federal investment will mean for Metro Transit.

The second topic I was asked to speak about was organizational changes. At this point in time because we don't know much about the Federal bill, I don't have any updates on what that may mean in terms of our organizational plans. Certainly, we intend to continue to use additional resources in accordance with existing transportation policies established by the Metropolitan Council. But I can, if it is of interest to a couple of organizational updates in 2020. But before I do that I also just wanted, since on the agenda, it mentioned the Metro Transit staffing. Really our probably number one priority when it comes to staffing right now, is hiring more operators. You might have heard that in December, when we did our usual quarterly service change, we actually had to redo services because we didn't have enough operators to cover the work we wanted to be able to provide right now.

While we made that change in December, we still are looking to hire more operators so we can maintain and build back our service levels and of course, with the rise in Covid cases, that just further compounding the changes making sure we have a healthy and available workforce to provide the service we committed to provide to the region. That was not really what I was asked to speak about today. But I didn't want to miss the opportunity to really note that that is our top staffing priority right now is recruiting more people to operate our vehicles so we can provide the service that we are committing to providing.

That being said, in mid-2021, there were two significant additions to Metro Transit staff. One was the creation of a new Deputy General Manager position over our capital management programs. Nick Thompson, who is a former director of MTS, was hired into that role. He started at the end of June 2021. Under his portfolio now is Metro Transit Engineering and Facilities. The light rail project office. The Bus Rapid Transit Projects. Asset Management Office and Transit Oriented Development. And so, this is a new role to bring together the various capital disciplines at Metro Transit to ensure we have a coherent, strategic approach to developing building and maintaining capital assets at Metro Transit. So the hiring of Nick Thompson to that new role is that change and certainly hire new positions as well. As we look to learn well as we look to learn more about the Federal infrastructure legislation and what it will mean for us and what additional opportunities to modernize and expand the system that funding may bring.

Another organizational change in mid-2021, was the hiring of a Senior Manager for Transit Equity. Metro Transit has had dedicated staff focused on equity since about 2015. But in 2021, we reclassified that position to make it a more senior level role. We hired Selina Martina to fill that Senior Manager position. Selina started at the end of June as well. She manages two additional full-time staff that comprise our Equity and Inclusion Unit.

If you haven't had Selina and her team here to present, that may be of interest of your committee. I am certain they would be interested in that. But Equity is a really significant core element to Metro Transit's strategic command. So a lot of the work that Selina is really fleshing out that strategic direction around equity and inclusion. That may be of interest to this committee.

Finally, I will just mention, we are actually undergoing another staffing transition that affects our customer relations and community engagement work. In December, Sam O'Connell, Metro Transit's Assistant Director of Community Affairs, took a new position at the Council as a Director of Community Relations based out of Regional Administration at the Metropolitan Council working closely with Chair Zelle. By leaving her role at Metro Transit, and we have a vacancy here, to find a new person to oversee our Customer Relations and Outreach and Engagement Department.

In the coming weeks we will be looking to post our position in hiring somebody to really lead that work here at Metro Transit as well. Those are the updates I had for you. But certainly, I am looking forward to any questions that you may have.

Rowan said I was just going to say this committee would be a way to reach out to various communities reflected and provide different context in that will allow you to reflect research needs.

Thorsen said I also found the organizational chart to be really helpful because I worked with Guthrie and with Ken on making the whole Met Council org chart both accessible and useable. For me, being able to understand who communicates with whom within the organization is really good. And I also think that that

same information regarding Metro Mobility would be very helpful to see how do those two units communicate. It is one thing of what services are we providing. But what staff people are connecting with each other to make that happen? In receiving feedback, to make the things that we want to happen. I found that chart to be very helpful.

Chair Fenley said I know what you are saying, Patty. About linking the two org charts.

Thorsen said I just wanted to say. It is the individual one of Metro Mobility and then either being able to link those together. We as readers. But I think having the two separate and then being able to digest it overall and then seeing how the two work together.

Paulsen said I just wanted to thank you Leslie. I think that information that you provided to us is valuable. I also think the organizational chart that you shared with us also shows us the complexity and the staff intricacies about how organizations like Metro Transit and how they have to operate. I do hope that you come back on a regular basis. I am going to talk to Chair Fenley after this and see that you come back as well. I think that you will get the input out of this committee would be helpful. I think that if you come back and hone in on some of the information that I think that you have and I think this committee could use or validate or invalidate at times.

One other point is making sure that Sonja comes back. She is the Equity person. And making sure that she comes back with you. So you guys could tag-team. And do a little presentation for us. I think you were spot on when you suggested those things.

Kandaras said thank you for those comments. I really like the idea of bringing our newest Senior Manager for Equity, Selena Martina to the meeting. I do love the idea of tag teaming the updates. I believe that I am tentatively penciled in to come back in February to give an update on the Police Work Group that we spoke about back in November. to obviously, at the discussion of the Chair. That is another topic of interest of this group. And I want to make sure we keep you abreast of what is happening there as well.

3. Legislative Update

Brooke Bordson, Government Affairs Liaison, Government Affairs Department, spoke to the TAAC committee. In putting things together for today, I realized that the 2021 session really dragged out. Until literally the last day, before there would be a shutdown. I don't think I was here for a final closeout for the 2021 session in the fall. So I am just going to hit on a couple of points that are important that did pass in the 2021 session. Because legislative sessions are a two-year biennium, 2021 really feeds into 2022 in that sense.

So 2021 was a budget year. As I mentioned, a special session was required to pass all of the bills that were agreed to. It took several months to get those bills agreed to and ultimately pass and sent to the Governors' desk. For Metro Area Transit, the final results on the budget were continued base level funding for Metro Mobility and our transit system operations. We received \$57.5 billion one-time appropriations specifically for Arterial Bus Rapid Transit (ABRT). And those funds will advance the E and F lines.

We also received authorization for Regional Transit Capital Bonds. Those are bonds that we request authorization for every two years and are used for small capital expenditures. That is primarily fleet replacement. So it is something we ask for every two years. It doesn't sound very exciting but those are critically important for not only Metro Transit fleet replacement, but Metro Mobility and Transit Link as well.

Saving the best for last. In the final transportation budget agreement, Metro Mobility was established as a forecasted program in the state budget. So that is effective starting with the state fiscal year of 2026 budget. What that means is the state budget forecast will incorporate a general fund obligation for the cost of Metro Mobility. And then the base funding amount will be set for the amount necessary to maintain service levels for Metro Mobility. That is important because every two years we are not going to go in and fight to get the right level of funding for Metro Mobility, which is a program that we know gets more and more expensive each year. And is a mandated service both at federal and state levels. So the amount that is provided for Metro Mobility in the state budget is not going to be just the static number anymore. It is going to reflect a thoughtful forecast about what the actual needs are going to be based on the expense and the ridership. Again, it doesn't really sound exciting on it's face. But it is really great news for Metro Nobility.

I just wanted to make sure that everybody heard about that because that is one of those things that happened later in the summer during the special session.

So then moving on to 2022. The even number years are traditionally bonding years. So the budget has been enacted and they technically don't need to do a budget bill because the government is funded for the two-year cycle. But there usually is some kind of supplemental budget that happens in the second year of the session. And then the bonding bill.

Before I get into the bonding bill, you might remember last year I spoke a few times about an initiative that we were trying to advance that would allow the Met Council and Metro Transit to establish an administrative citation program for fare enforcement. That would replace the current criminal system where a police officer would have to write you a criminal citation. This will let us have an administrative program where we didn't need sworn personnel to inspect fares. Who would handle the violations internally rather than that becoming a criminal court matter.

That did not pass in 2021. We had a lot of discussions about it. We had a lot of more people to understand the proposal and why it makes sense. So it is still going to be in play in 2022. The bill is still alive. We are hoping that this year we could get that final push to get that authorization. That is something that is going to be continuing in 2022.

We will also have a bonding request for our busway program. And hope that gets included in the Governor's bonding bill. We won't know that until mid-January. That is when the Governor is planning to release his bonding proposal. So if not next week, then probably early in the week after that. For a supplemental budget recommendation from the Governor, we are not expecting those until the end of January.

You may have seen it. It was big news because it was a big number. But the Minnesota Management and Budget, who produces the state budget forecast projected a surplus of \$7.7 billion in their November forecast. It is going to be updated in February. The February number is the one that legislators use. If and when they do agree to a supplemental budget package.

So we will see how that changes. But in any case, it looks like they are going to have a pretty significant amount of money on the table for a potential supplemental budget. Everything is a little bit more complicated this year given the federal legislation that had the infrastructure bill which you have heard a little bit about it. A consideration if any of those programs require matching funds. How do we provide for that given the state level? There are also funds remaining from the American Rescue Plan package that Congress passed last year. You may also hear that referred to as. It was the ARP bill.

So there are a lot of moving pieces. It is always complicated to put a supplemental budget together. It is especially complicated this year when you are given those other factors. There is obviously, we are still dealing with the pandemic, which is going to impact the need for funding in certain programs.

I believe the State of Minnesota has about \$1 billion to pay back to the federal government for the Unemployment Insurance Trust Fund. So again, there is just a lot of moving pieces that make it hard to come up with one document explaining your budget proposal. But we are still going to see that at the end of January.

I'll just note at the end. The House has already announced that House activity is going to remain mostly remote. Which is what they did last year. So, if any of you participated or watched any Zoom meetings, I hope you have that down because you will be going back to that for the House. The Senate has not said what their plan is going to be. So, that is to be determined.

The last thing I wanted to note is that this is an election year. It is a super election year because the governor will be up for election. Every member of the House and every member of the Senate. So it is going to be full board election and that always makes the legislative session a bit trickier.

That is the high-level overview we are looking forward to on January 31, when the legislators come back. They don't come back physically. They will get their Zoom back on. I am happy to answer any questions you might have.

Chair Fenley said I think this is vitally important. We usually get pretty regular updates from your Government Relations Office. Just a quick point on why. All of the TAAC members here are active advocates in the disability world. That does include advocating for a position on policies and budgets up at the Capitol. Whether they do it on an individual basis or we as a group decide to support a particular position. We can throw the weight of the committee on that if it is agreed upon as a group.

But it is important to keep updates for what is going on from the Met Council's perspective. So, we look forward to having you back. And I will give it to Darrell.

Vice Chair Paulsen said each one of us has an obligation and a duty to be as active as we can in our lives and our community. So many of us do that through a number of ways. One of the things that I heard you say, Brooke, is that there was some funding for Metro Mobility. I am talking about their equipment. Their GPS's have not been updated for quite some time. They have been out of date. They are a sore subject with a number of their drivers. Whether it is the drivers that they have had for a while. Or whether it is a driver in a pool that keeps turning over. Or whether it is an Opt Out Service or one of their other services.

Those GPS's have caused more problems, more incidences than has been reported. I just want to know, are there any efforts to give the drivers better tools and better equipment to be able to do their jobs? Whether it is done by zones, or whether we have to do it is by projects. What is the timeline on replacing some of those equipment?

Bordson said that is a good question. The question that comes to my mind is whether those technology components are in our fleet? Do they qualify as a capital expenditure? Or an operating expenditure. Because when dealing with either bond funds or capital investment dollars, there has been a lot of restrictions on how you can use that money. One of them is it has to have a long lifespan. Like a building. You are not going to be replacing a building every two years. Or infrastructure that is meant to last for decades. I don't know if a GPS system would be part of the capital side of the operations or the operational side. And that would determine what funding you could use for that upgrade. I will ask about that. That is another question that has come up regarding forecasting for Metro Mobility.

When we are talking about providing the service, is that going to cover the capital side or are we going to use the same tools to provide for the capital side and the forecast will be adjusted for the Operational expenses?

I will try to find more information about it but, it depends on what kind of money can be used for those technological pieces. Things get complicated even when things are resolved. Implementation brings a whole new set of questions.

Vice Chair Paulsen said I also want to thank you for your presentation even though it wasn't quite as detailed as I am used to seeing. I am looking forward to helping the Council trying to remove the barriers. I know a couple of other committee members that may or may not be here today may be on board with that today. Thank you for giving us some really interesting details. Even though it deals with money, and it deals with typically don't really dabble into a lot, it sets the stage for how we intend to use the service. And how we tend to think about the service through our communities.

SUBCOMMITTEE REPORTS

Chair Fenley said the TAAC committee has members who attend these meetings and bring the information from the meeting to the TAAC committee. They also bring the TAAC committee perspective to the other committee. When the Orange Line was in the planning phase, I sat on this committee. But now they are done designing and just building the Orange Line, I removed it from the agenda.

1. Blue Line

Ken Rodgers sent an email update to the TAAC committee members.

2. Green Line

This item was not presented.

3. Gold Line

Vice Chair Paulsen said I also sent information about the Gold Line to the TAAC members. They were copied articles from the Gold Line publication on which they featured Maplewood, particularly, in their article. They asked me questions as the Co-Chair of the Community and Business Advisory Committee that is part of the Gold Line and the expansion.

4. Purple Line

Vice Chair Paulsen said I will be transitioning in the near future to what we used to call the Rush Line, which we call the Purple Line. Which the Feds just recently gave that dedicated Purple Line a little over a

month ago. They have gotten their go ahead to venture into their next phase. So that means their environmental study and their impact studies have been approved and cleared. Having said that, my report should stand as they were sent. I can answer any questions.

Bus Priority Seating TAAC Work Group

Vice Chair Paulsen said I have seen the finished video. I have not seen where it has gone out to the public yet. Other than when it has been distributed privately. So I am not sure of the particular detail on that. I would say that when we see the final edits and the actual video itself. It was very well done. I do know internally, they are very thankful that TAAC members were able to take part in this.

It was very much an opportunity for TAAC members to show the real need for accessibility on public transit. Even though it was a short introduction to some driver training, even people in the general public were watching us the day we made the videos. They wanted to know what was going on. Some of them already knew about the priority seating and it was just the thing to do when somebody asks for it or needed it. And people didn't know that this was an issue at all. They assumed that there were more than two seats. Or they assumed that there was enough or another option. They didn't know.

So to do this, in cooperation with Metro Transit was a big thing. And it was a huge thing for this committee to be a part of. I hope we share the video with the TAAC committee at some point. The training piece is probably longer than the two- or three-minute video but we should be able to share it.

Jasmine said I did see it in the Connect newsletter in November. I myself, was happy to have done it. My understanding was that there were two different videos created. Correct me if I am wrong. But I was a bit disappointed because in the Connect newsletter, which was extremely public. There was no audio describing that release. So I am not sure why it was released without an audio description. I think there was a mistake made with communication, but I have questions about how we could eliminate that happening again. Because everything that is in regards to this, could definitely be video described and definitely not leave the building before what people understand that it is where it needs to go. It needs to be, especially in the public, where there are so many people that have the disabilities, should have it audio described. I am hoping we can get back to the table and understand how the rest of this marketing is going to play out.

Vice Chair Paulsen said I think that that is very valuable. I miss that as well. I believe the audio description was out with the first version we have seen and looked at. I did see this video go out under the YouTube channels at the Met Council. I know the video is out there and it is being played. I just wanted to know how this video is being implemented in their training and how it is being used in a particular way. Because if it is just being used publicly, to make us look good. Or to make some of the drivers feel good. And it reminds the drivers to do something different, I think that is missing the boat as to why we put this together in the first place. So I do think, to your point, Sam. I think that this is an opportunity for us to go back to the table and say where this sits and what they are doing with it.

Jasmine said I hope that the next Connection letter will have the auto describe in it. As I said, we viewed the one with the auto description. The one they released. Is not audio described. So I am not sure where the audio described one is or is it being released now? Perhaps we could get an answer.

Vice Chair Paulsen said I will give you an answer at the next meeting.

Chair Fenley said It does look like it is right on Metro Transit's website. It does look like there is a link in the chat. Sam, I know you are calling in so you can't follow that link. I would be happy to email that to you. I think you are right Sam. I think it was a communication error. It looks like somebody didn't check on the right box and attached the wrong video to that communication. But I think that if we are ready for it in February, we can have a discussion on it. Show the video and maybe have a debrief. To improve the process going forward.

Jasmine said I am hoping that the newsletter gets the audio described video in it because the non-audio described was not in it in November. So hoping that they have the audio described one in the next one, if they are going to put it in there at all. In regards to that.

Chair Fenley said Rachel, if you want more background information on this, it might be kind of a firehose here. We don't have a lot of industry. I am happy to do it offline. Or even give a quick description of what led up to this right now because we have a few minutes. But, more than happy to do something a little more historical for you, if you want. Did anybody have comments or questions on the priority seating video campaign that we have been working on for a year now?

CHAIRS REPORT

I have just a couple of things to talk about in my report. Mainly just updates from last month. And also reminding folks about a couple of the fun things that we plan to do this year. And I will be looking for support from all of you. The first one being 2022 is the 30th anniversary of this committee, The Transportation Accessibility Advisory Committee and a pretty good number of you volunteered to be on the celebration task force. More information to come on that.

Rachel, you are more than welcome to jump on that if you want. One thing that we have been trying to do on TAAC, over the last year or two is to form subcommittees for work groups or task forces that allow TAAC members to dive deeper into some of the work that we do. Deeper being that we meet for two hours per month. Ten or 11 times per year. That is not a lot of time to get some of this work done. So I think it is important to have a little more time devoted to this. I am not going to force people to sit on any of these groups. But folks tend to be really more than happy to jump in and do this extra work.

This Priority Seating Campaign is one of the more awesome little work groups put together over the last year.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Andy Streasick said I just needed to notify the TAAC ahead of time here that it was decided this morning that we are going to be re-rolling out the request to riders to please consider cancelling non-essential trips. Again, it is on the rider to decide what is or is not an essential trip. It is then on the rider to cancel the trip if it is not essential. We are just asking for it again. On the phone message when people call in or email if people are on the email list. And on the website. Because the driver pool is totally decimated from this latest Covid19 variant. When you combine that with the fact that we were further behind for vacancies of drivers than we have ever been in the history of Metro Mobility. Those two things have combined to really hinder the service in a pretty major way.

So, for people's safety, as this variant proves to be so transmittable and for the protection of the service for people who are really relying on it for essential trips. We are going to be asking again for people to cancel any non-essential trips they have. However, they may define that.

MEMBER COMMENT

Jasmine said I just wanted to thank Andy for the help with changing something on the Metro Mobility. Because I had painfully been dealing with a change that they made in regards to some construction at the Minneapolis Public Library downtown. They were stopping at points on Nicollet and were having to give much more descriptive things to make sure the driver came up and found you. That is done now. and Andy helped me get it switched so they can actually take you to the Hennepin entrance now. More quickly.

Chair Fenley said I will use Member Comment to read Guthrie's post in he chat. It is the chat regarding the video rollout. On the issue that Sam raised. The non-audio described version was put in the newsletter last month. So Guthrie said: conversations with staff including guidance going forward, had occurred between him, Guthrie and the video creators so this does not happen again.

So, I had a feeling that it was being taken care of internally and I am glad that you, Guthrie, have confirmed that now for committee members. That mistakes like that don't happen moving forward because all communications and the Met Council knows this, and we know this full well. All communications do need to be fully accessible.

Vice Chair Paulsen said I want to thank Rachel very much for being on the committee and I also wanted to let the committee know that I did bring up issues related to the family bathroom that is in the transit center of the Mall of America. They have since taken down the sign that requires them to leave that open during business hours. I am very irritated, and I would love to go with David or someone from the Council to let them know. Or do a zoom call with them. To let them know that just because you took down the sign, and now nobody knows it is there, doesn't mean that you have solved your issue. Because I still know it is there.

Unless you are going to permanently go to close it, and take it out of there, people need to use it. That is where the Metro Mobility drop off is. That is where the waiting area is as well. So they need that space, with their companion or their PCA. They do need that space and it needs to be available to them. I wanted you to know that that did happen. I see that over the holidays, I did not want to make an issue about it because I was out

there during the gun incident. The lockdown. We didn't get to move around much. I was on the second floor. It happened on the third floor.

Chair Fenley said I will take the Member Comment to thank John Clark. He served on the TAAC committee for three years. He always brought a fun, philosophical perspective to the work that we did. It will be sad to not have him here anymore. His service was definitely noticed. I think we gained a lot from him.

ADJOURNMENT

Business completed, the meeting adjourned at 2:14 p.m.

Alison Coleman
Recording Secretary