

# **Minutes of the REGULAR MEETING OF THE TAAC COMMITTEE**

Wednesday, January 06, 2016

**Committee Members Present:** Chair Kjensmo Walker, Christopher Bates, Adora Sage, Ken Rodgers, Robert Platz, Kari Sheldon, Nichole Villavicencio, Bob Anderson, Margot Imdieke Cross, David Fenley and Patty Thorsen.

**Committee Members Absent:** Julianne Bina

**Committee Members Excused:** Heidi Myhre

**Council Staff Present:** Jeff Freeman, Derek Berube, Kim Zlimen, Mark Leemon, Jason Podany, Mike Richter and Pam Steffen from Metro Transit, Mai Thor, Heidi Schallberg, Andrew Krueger, Jennifer O'Rourke, Andy Streasick and Alison Coleman.

**Public Present:** Rick Cardenas, Kristin Jorenby, Mark Hughes and Rosalind Sampson.

## **CALL TO ORDER**

A quorum being present, Committee Chair Walker called the regular meeting of the Council's TAAC Committee to order at 12:31 p.m. on Wednesday, January 06, 2016.

## **APPROVAL OF AGENDA AND MINUTES**

It was moved by Bates, seconded by Thorsen to approve the agenda. **Motion carried.**

It was moved by Bates, seconded by Thorsen to approve the minutes of the December 2, 2015 regular meeting of the TAAC Committee. **Motion carried.**

## **BUSINESS & INFORMATION**

### **1. Mall of America Transit Station Update**

Jeff Freeman, Senior Project Coordinator at Metro Transit, spoke to the TAAC committee. He worked on this project in 2011. He is now finishing the project and turning it over to Derek Berube. Originally this building was built as a time transfer facility in 1992 for busing. At the time it was built it was new and innovative. It brought transit near the mall itself. In 2004 they modified the facility for the opening of the light rail. At that time it had a contractual obligation with the mall to remodel the transit station waiting area. But at the same time they added the LRT tracks and that did a couple of things. They went from 13 gates to five of which they used four. Right now, for pickup and one is solely for drop off. It also divided the area in half as they brought the light rail in.

In 2014 they added the Red Line service that comes out of Dakota County. They installed at that time a temporary platform for that facility. Knowing that this work is what they talk about today. At that point they had finished the master planning and were looking to find the funding to go into design and construction. Going into this thing in 2011 the Mall of America approached Metro Transit and asked them to do some aesthetic upgrades to the facility in time for their 2012 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It didn't give them a lot of time to respond. They looked at how the facility looked and what things they could do to make it look better.

It became apparent that the facility itself really didn't operate that well as a transit station any longer. They had a number of issues at hand. They made the determination to engage in a master planning project. With those goals they had these project objectives where they were looking to eliminate the waiting of buses as they entered the facility. They were looking to create a high capacity bus service in closer proximity to each other and to rail. They were looking at the safety aspects of eliminating the need for Red Line and Blue Line passengers to cross LRT tracks and/or busways. They were also looking for a better siting for Metro Mobility.

They are in the back of the transit station. It works O.K. It is not a preferred situation because it is rather hard to find if you are coming from the mall down to the station.

They are looking to provide a convenient waiting area with direct access to the mall. This is something the City of Bloomington, who are partners of this project, had requested as they redeveloped the south loop area. They would really like to have an east facing presence of the mall as it comes to the transit station so people who live in the east/south loop area can see where they enter into the transit facility. He showed a drawing of the facility. Currently the buses come into Gate 6. Everybody who uses the lower level comes into Gate 6. There are mass transit vehicles like Metro Mobility. Until recently they had shuttles, coaches and taxis joining them along with vendors, contractors, mall employees and all of their deliveries.

At times this created an incredible delay. Early in the fall they had delays as long as 12 minutes. Those delays were not only occurring in the peak rush hour but even in the evening at 9:00 p.m. It made it difficult to make a reliable transfer from one of the services to another.

From the existing LRT platform to get into the transit station you have to cross the busway. This became a challenge for people because this is dark and it is hard to see where you are going and to easily be seen. One of the primary goals when they look at this project was to improve the aesthetics' by improving lighting but also simplify the process for entry into the mall. During the aesthetic process they were talking with the folks at the mall and they said they think this aesthetic thing is a great idea but they think they could also find a way to create an opportunity for people to directly enter the mall from the transit station. It will require some work on Metro Transit's part. If Metro Transit is willing to do the work, the mall will provide the access to the space required to make this happen.

With that, Metro Transit went off on their master planning effort and came up with a proposed configuration that looks like what they have in the drawing right now. There is the LRT platform in the center. Then to the left is a new waiting area that provides access to 24<sup>th</sup> Avenue. It is a direct 20 to 30 feet from the end of the light rail where you are inside the facility. It also provides direct access into the Mall of America. The entry point is where guest services area is just as you come into the mall where the Water World and the guest services area is. No more crossing of the busways.

There will be more ticket machines and a larger waiting area. They will be rebuilding the Police Station there as well as an operator break room. There will be a few steps and a ramp coming down from 24<sup>th</sup> Avenue.

The project timeline is to begin design on January 4, 2016. Complete the design by May 2016. Start construction in September 2016 and complete construction by November 2017.

They have set up Technical Advisory Committees and five sub groups (safety, architecture, technology, security and operations). They will be meeting bi-weekly as the design is going on.

This project is unique to the expansion of the mall. The mall itself always has an expansion going on. There is retail, office and hotel. September 29, 2015 they announced a \$500 million expansion that is going forward. That has more high end retail, high end hotel and possibly condominiums. This project is one item that is going on in the mall. Metro Transit will continue to stay in operations as best they can. They do not anticipate disrupting bus service. The phasing and staging of the project can be accommodated without having to drop people off across the street. They look at it as a complementary thing. Of the 15,000 employees at the mall, 20 percent of them use public transportation.

The bus service is to the west of the LRT platform. By moving the operations to the east side they go from four gates of operation to 17. There is a bus lane that is closest to the LRT platform. The very first spot when you turn the corner would be the spot where Metro Mobility would be. It is the closest spot to the entry point. On the closest lane to the platform they are looking to locate the high frequency, high capacity service. That would be the Red Line, Route 5, Route 515 and Route 54. They have high frequency and a higher number of riders. Once the passengers get off the bus they are on a platform. They don't have to cross a busway. They are just walking adjacent or parallel to the LRT platform and entering into the waiting area. They have 2.5 million passengers a year on rail and 500,000 or 600,000 on the high frequency bus routes. So 65 to 70 percent of the passengers that are using this facility no longer cross a busway or LRT track to enter into the transit waiting station. Everybody who is going into the mall will no longer have to cross the railroad. That was always a challenge.

Ken Rodgers suggested that the steps next to the ramp be eliminated.

The elevator next to the escalator by the passenger waiting area will go up one floor into the mall. The other elevator shafts attached to the parking ramp will serve all seven levels.

There will be a variety of benches. Imdieke Cross will send information on benches to Pam Steffen.

They are looking to have 17 gates for LRT and buses.

Thorsen asked for railings on both sides of the the ramp.

Chair Walker suggested an ADA accessibility team be represented when doing the construction phase. She also suggested that they have a person that uses a mobility device and someone with low to no vision be part of the design planning team.

The future facility will have restrooms. They will be designed to handle a larger number of people. The final finishes and selections will be more durable than what you would find in the standard restaurant or office building restrooms. They are moving 2.5 million people a year through the facility.

## **2. Bus Annunciator Update**

Jason Podany, Business Systems Analyst II at Metro Transit, spoke to the TAAC committee. Back in 2012 they had automated announcements on the buses of routes 10, 17 and 18. In June of 2014 they had announcements implemented on the Red Line BRT service. In January 2015 announcements were implemented on Hi-Frequency routes (10-12 of the busiest bus routes). They implemented the announcements system wide on all Metro Transit and Metropolitan Transportation Services (MTS) bus routes by October of 2015. This is mainly all buses in the Metro Transit service area. Over 70 percent of the buses have announcement hardware. The announcements will be implemented on all buses as new bus procurement occurs. This will occur in the next two to four years.

They do this because people struggle to navigate. It helps individuals with disabilities. It is difficult to see at night and inconsistent operator announcements. They also did a survey of customers and operators. Out of 123 customers surveyed, 76 percent said that the announcements were very helpful, 18 percent said they were somewhat helpful and six percent said they were not helpful.

Of the 132 bus operators surveyed 58 percent said they were very helpful, 33 percent said they were somewhat helpful and nine percent said they were not helpful.

There are two types of automated announcements. 1. Internal announcements, which are made on the interior of the bus and include approaching bus stop information. 2. External announcements, which are made outside the front door of a bus and identify the bus route number and destination information.

The announcement program development and content is guided by ADA requirements (49 CFR 37.167). It states:

“The entity shall announce at least at transfer points with other fixed routes, other major intersections and destination points, and intervals along a route sufficient to permit individuals with visual impairments or other disabilities to be oriented to their location. i.e. internal announcements.”

“When buses share the same route or stop, the agency is required to provide a means by which an individual with a visual impairment or other disability can identify his/her proper bus. i.e. external announcements.”

The external automated announcements are made every time the operator opens the front door at a bus stop. They announce information matching overhead signs (route, branch letter, direction and destination (s)). The external volumes are reduced from 8:00 p.m. – 7:00 a.m. They have the ability to make volumes louder at noisy bus stops. They removed the “Welcome aboard” announcement and only announce relevant information.

The internal automated announcements are made on the interior of the bus when the bus enters designated bus stop zones. It is GPS activated. The default is 800 feet ahead of stops; 2,000 feet for high speed stops. The announcement scrolls on LED Stop Requested sign.

When they planned to go system wide the plan was to announce all stops. Then they looked at the ADA requirements and looked at the ease of program communication to operators and customers. It could be exasperating to customers and operators. It could be a distraction to operators. With the maintenance efforts the wireless file size interface was a challenge to the buses and they had to manage the weekly bus stop and bus route changes.

They did customer, operator and peer agency surveys. It helps to avoid customers pulling stop requested cord at the wrong stop. They looked at the volume of announcements in ADA scenarios versus all stops. The FTA asks bus operators to emulate automated announcement content when hardware doesn't work or exist.

The ADA requirements are transfer points, destination points, major intersections and intervals. The transfer database includes about 7,000 transfers. It is managed by the Customer Information Department. They are to announce "This is a major transfer point" when the transfer is more than four transfer opportunities to other routes. The improved downtown transfer content is being planned.

The destination points are otherwise known as "landmarks." Some of the landmarks included are hospitals, universities, high schools, libraries, shopping centers, major establishments and government centers.

With the major intersections, the FTA states that the definition can be locally defined. The options identified include traffic signals, stop signs, roundabouts, arterial road intersections, etc. The decision was made to announce bus stops located at traffic signals. The data can be systematically maintained. It is easy to identify by bus operators and customers.

The last of the requirements are intervals. Intervals are announcements intended to fill in the gaps of announcements and provide orientation to customers. The local orientation intervals are places where significant gaps exist because bus stops do not meet ADA requirements. The freeway intervals commonly occurs on express routes on freeways and will give orientation information. It will be implemented with new schedule software in February 2016.

They are to also announce all time points and when buses turn onto new streets. Additional stops can be announced upon request. They are working towards ADA compliance (they may be one of the first transit agencies to be ADA compliant).

Looking ahead. The A-Line announcement content is being developed. Their plan is to announce every station on the A-Line. There is improved downtown transfer content (this came from TAAC feedback). They will add freeway intervals, refine pronunciations and refine quality control efforts by making sure buses are working properly.

### **3. Transit Team Metro Mobility Update**

Michael Richter, President and CEO of Transit Team spoke to the TAAC committee. They are a locally owned paratransit transportation provider in Minneapolis. They are currently operating the west metro Metro Mobility contract. They have been operating a Metro Mobility contract since 1986. They are currently operating 172 Metro Mobility vehicles from the headquarter facility in Minneapolis. Of those 172 vehicles, they have 12 SUV's, three sedans and the remaining vehicles are cutaway buses. They are all stored, headquartered and maintained in their Minneapolis facility. 2016 is an exciting year for them. They are going to be adding a secondary satellite facility in Maple Grove. They have some expansion with the service growing eight to 10 percent a year they need to keep up with. Not only with places for the employees to park, but areas to maintain and store those vehicles. The plan is to operate at a 44,000 square foot facility in Maple Grove where they can store all of the vehicles inside the Maple Grove facility and the Minneapolis facility.

That will help them to reduce some a.m. deadhead. That would be the time or distance it takes them to get to some of the first pick ups. Reducing some of the money that is spent not transporting passengers. They have a lot of people who commute from Cambridge, Isanti, Rogers and Zimmerman. It is a facility that is actually going to be in close proximity to some of those people that live in those areas. That is an added benefit to some of their employees.

Current staffing levels. They have 309 employees as of December 31, 2014. That consists of 257 drivers, 20 reservation staff, nine dispatch and routing staff members, 10 mechanics, six building maintenance staff members and seven management and admin staff. Hiring is a challenge for transportation companies, school bus companies and bus providers. They had a fairly good last 12 months as far as hiring goes. Since the fall of 2014 they have used a hiring bonus to hopefully help get applicants in the door and maintain an adequate level of applicant flow. Additionally they offer their current employees a referral bonus as well. So if an employee refers a new employee that they hire and that new employee sticks with them for a certain amount of time, the current employee is paid a referral bonus. It has been very successful.

In the initial new driver classroom training over the last 12 months they have averaged about seven new hires per driver classroom training. That is up almost 40 percent over 2013. They really haven't done much more

than post more employment ads, adding the hiring bonus and increasing the internal referral bonus. They have seen a lot of positive applicant flow with the bonus and because they are always hiring.

Driver retention. Over the last 12 months they have been able to retain over 70 percent of new hires. In the past they had a lot of difficulty before 2013 when they had the Ranger MDT system. Once the drivers got through their 30 day probationary training period and they got out on their own they felt that dispatch wasn't helping them as they should. It was like they were sinking. The MDT allowed them to provide some GPS support for people who have a difficult time finding addresses but it also keeps the dispatch staff and routing staff to get two to three minute updates to the routes and move or thin out routes for people who are running into operational challenges or running behind or into traffic or construction.

Transit Team is family owned since 1959 and a good place to work. He and his wife bought the business in July of 2012. They have a very competitive wage scale and benefits package. The family oriented culture goes a long way for a lot of their employees. Each one of the drivers are eligible for an annual pay increase. It is a pretty significant pay increase verses some of the competitors in the marketplace. They receive two annual bonuses. One for driver's appreciation day. That is when they celebrate drivers all day long with breakfast, lunch and dinner. They have games and prizes. This is to thank everybody for what they do on a daily basis. They also give everyone a holiday bonus right around the time of the annual holiday party. They give a \$25.00 certificate to Lunds and Byerlys for everybody to purchase a turkey. They give some other incentives.

Driver's breaks have been discussed. Every driver is scheduled for a 30 minute lunch break. It is inserted into their template. Every route has a template with standing orders. They can't make the drivers take a lunch break. About 50 percent of the drivers skip their lunch break. They can ask dispatch to find them time for a break. Some of the drivers bring snacks to eat before a pickup. They may stop for coffee or a soda instead of taking the full 30 minutes.

They have always maintained an open door policy with the drivers and management. If an employee has a concern they are encouraged to voice that concern.

They have a sliding wage scale based on the shift that the driver chooses. It ranges from \$13.00 an hour up to \$14.50 an hour. The \$13.00 an hour Monday through Friday would be a straight shift (7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.) with a break time in there. The next one would be a split. They have a lot more of those. The routes are more structured with the same standing orders every single day of the week. it gives them a chance to be successful in the future. It would be 6:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. with a two hour break. People also work weekend days and night shifts. It all depends on what the current needs are. Fifty percent of the employees have worked there for five years or more.

There were two days where the computers were down. The reservationists had a hard time with getting rides scheduled. The portal was down and they couldn't get into Trapeze. If there is a problem the customer may call customer service.

## **SUBCOMMITTEE REPORTS**

### **1. Blue Line**

This item was not presented.

### **2. Green Line**

This item was not presented.

### **3. Orange Line**

This item was not presented.

## **PUBLIC COMMENT**

Mark Hughes spoke to the TAAC committee about a problem he had.

Andy Streasick spoke for Rick Cardenas about difficulty crossing the LRT tracks.

## **MEMBER COMMENT**

Ken Rodgers spoke to the TAAC committee. There was a member of the community that was killed trying to get across some tracks. There were four or five pedestrian accidents or deaths in a short period of time. He has been very vocal about safety around the light rail. There still are some significant safety issues. He calls on the TAAC to do what it needs to do to bring this issue forward and do something. They need to apply pressure or put together a task force. There are some investigations taking place. The TAAC needs to raise the level of concern. If they have to go to the legislature then do that. If they need to talk to the commissioners then do that. This committee needs to be active.

Pam Steffen said that prior to these things happening Metro Transit had on their radar a rollout of a safety campaign. She hasn't seen it yet. Billboards, signs at stations and trains. Later this year they will pilot some enhancements and warning signs along University. They have a meeting tomorrow with WCCO regarding some public service announcement. Right now they have a handful of things that they had planned doing prior to these things that are in process already. She likes Ken's idea of a task team. It may be necessary to hold some town hall meetings to get some input to hone on the issues. She is going to recommend that as part of this process. Metro Transit is open to any suggestions anyone might have to make it better so that these things don't happen again.

## **ADJOURNMENT**

Business completed, the meeting adjourned at 2:32 p.m.

Alison Coleman  
Recording Secretary