



## METRO Blue Line Extension Corridor Management Committee (CMC) Meeting Summary

Date & Time	December 14, 2023 1:30 – 3:00 PM
Location	F.T. Heywood Chambers, 560 N 6th Ave, Minneapolis
CMC Attendees	Jim Adams, Karla Arredondo Payan, Bill Blonigan, Anjuli Cameron, Reva Chamblis, Dan Doerrer, Irene Fernando, Meg Forney, Jonathan Hansen, Jeff Lunde, Ricardo Perez, Suzanne Sobotka, Charlie Zelle
Project Staff	Chris Beckwith, Cathy Gold, Lesley Kandaras, Joleen Ketterling, Shahin Khazrajafari, Ryan Kronzer, Nick Landwer, Kyle Mianulli, Koehl Simmons, Kaja Vang, Kjerstin Yager

### 1. Call to Order and Welcome

Chair Charlie Zelle, Metropolitan Council, called the meeting to order at 1:32 pm.

Chair Zelle extended a warm welcome to the Corridor Management Committee (CMC) members and members of the public. Chair Zelle allowed members to introduce themselves.

Chair Zelle mentioned that meeting materials for today's meeting are available on the project's website at [bluelineext.org](http://bluelineext.org). Additionally, members of the public are welcome to submit their comments regarding this meeting to Nkongo Cigolo, Metropolitan Council by Friday, December 22, 2023.

Chair Zelle announced that in today's meeting, members will receive an update from Lesley Kandaras, METRO Transit's General Manager. In addition, there will be a design update focused on the proposed Lowry Station in Minneapolis, a communications update, and a progress update on Anti-Displacement. The meeting will begin with a 15-minute public comment period, allowing individuals to share their thoughts and feedback.

Chair Zelle announced that last night the Metropolitan Council approved the hiring of Ryan O'Conner, Regional Administrator. Ryan comes from Ramsey County where he served as county manager since 2018. Prior to this experience, he held positions as the Deputy County Manager and the Director of Policy Analysis and Planning for Ramsey County. Chair Zelle stated his vision and extensive experience will be important to our success with this project.



## **2. Public Invitation**

During the public comment segment, one individual shared her thoughts: Kathy Neitzke, resident of the Lyn Park neighborhood. The complete video recording of her comments, in her own words, can be accessed on the project's [website](#).

## **3. Approval of November 9, 2023, BLRT CMC Meeting Minutes**

Chair Zelle requested a motion to approve the CMC Meeting Minutes from November 9. Mayor Jim Adams, City of Crystal, moved for approval, and Mayor Bill Blonigan, City of Robbinsdale seconded the motion. The minutes were approved.

## **4. Community and Business Advisory Committee Reports**

Dan Doerrer, Co-Chair of the Business Advisory Committee (BAC), shared insights from the recent BAC Meeting on December 5, 2023. He reported that the committee members appreciated the update regarding communications. A good portion of the meeting focused on the uncertainty with the project and the anxiety that comes with that. The committee members acknowledged the reality that some key components of the project are out of the hands of the Blue Line Extension (BLE) project team such as parking decisions along the route, zoning, and taxation. Co-Chair Doerrer stated he understands the CMC is the venue to voice updates and concerns, but he wanted to convey that the BAC committee members strongly feel more information should be shared around expectations or aspirations of the municipalities in regard to the route, zoning and taxation.

Jonathan Hansen (sitting in for Co-Chair Jason Greenberg) of the Community Advisory Committee (CAC) provided an update on the recent CAC meeting that took place on December 6, 2023. Mr. Hansen stated committee members appreciated the update on communications and it was noticed that most or all the footage for the Campaign Recap Video was shot locally and they recognized some of the people. The CAC committee members would like to see more videos of this nature and were happy to hear the communications team is planning to begin a podcast and produce more videos in 2024. Mr. Hansen shared that committee members appreciated the effort made to update the design for the Lowry Station and this updated design will definitely help with some of the concerns residents have voiced and provides better connections in the area.

## **5. METRO Transit General Manager Update – Lesley Kandaras**

Lesley Kandaras, General Manager (GM) at METRO Transit, provided an agency update. GM Kandaras shared that when reflecting on 2023, METRO Transit is seeing a lot of positive signs on ridership. Ridership is up about 15% from 2022 and 2022 is higher than 2021. Systemwide, ridership is at 57% of pre-COVID ridership. The state legislature bill passed this year included highlighting free fares. She shared that METRO Mobility



certified riders can ride throughout the system for free. In addition, a pilot program began on July 1, 2023, running through December 2024, offering free fares on two METRO Transit routes. She shared that higher ridership is being seen on these routes; 9% increase for Route 62 and a 26% increase for Route 32. At the end of the pilot program, METRO Transit will report to the legislature what they learned.

GM Kandaras also shared some good news on the service side, while still facing a significant workforce shortage, METRO Transit has hired more operators, allowing for an additional service to be brought back. METRO Transit is continuing to look at ways to be a strong employer of choice.

On the public safety side, GM Kandaras shared that METRO Transit has spent a lot of energy and focus on ensuring safety is top priority. Several initiatives have been implemented with the goal of improving public safety and the perception of safety on our system. In addition, several legislative initiatives passed earlier this year including the launch of the Transit Service Intervention Project which increases social services and law enforcement presence. The Homeless Action Team (HAT), part of the METRO Transit Police Department, contracted with 10 community-based organizations to help with social outreach. Another component of the transportation omnibus bill was the Transit Rider Investment Program (TRIP) implemented to address ridership and safety concerns and change the approach to fare compliance. Nonsworn TRIP personnel are trained to do fare inspections and apply another level of safety to the system. TRIP agents will have an onboard presence and educate riders on how to be fare compliant.

GM Kandaras mentioned the Light Rail Transit (LRT) Platform Study was shared with the Metropolitan Council in November 2023. This study is currently underway and expected to be complete in Spring 2024. The focus of this study is reviewing potential investment opportunities at existing light rail platform facilities by identifying industry best practices to provide a safer and more secure environment. Potential infrastructure upgrades include lighting, technology, fare gate systems, and other elements.

GM Kandaras shared that as METRO Transit conduct this study and look at all the approaches and tools available, it is important to be mindful that there are still challenges associated with many of the options. She provided examples of the many challenges: gated systems or turnstiles can be challenging to navigate; emergency egress is still needed; different mobility needs exist; station agents and/or other personnel are still needed to assist with equipment use and issues; looking at what it would mean to METRO Transit's current infrastructure to provide an at-grade crossing system in urban settings; reliable equipment functionality in a northern climate environment; and whether an enclosure would lead people to trespass into the guideway with low platforms. GM Kandaras shared a couple of photos that demonstrated how METRO Transit light rail system is built differently than others; one photo was of the Bloomington Central Station showing the platform level at 14" versus



a photo in St. Louis, MO where the platform level is at 40”.

As METRO Transit looks forward to 2024, GM Kandaras stated this is a very pivotal time for light rail transit. Changes in the legislature earlier this year include a new transportation sales tax that will help fund and support transportation projects in the metro area. People have voiced that they want a safe, clean, reliable system with more options to get to the places that matter the most to them. METRO Transit invites people to co-create a vision for where it’s heading.

Chair Zelle congratulated GM Kandaras on the progress being made so far. He stated it is great to see investments in safety initiatives and the workforce as well as plans for improvement in the future.

Commissioner Irene Fernando, Hennepin County, thanked GM Kandaras for the update and work that METRO Transit are doing. She inquired about the pilot program with the free fare on two routes and whether the routes have been perceived as safer or less safe. Commissioner Fernando stated she recently attended a fare session at an impact mobility conference, and it was interesting to see what other systems are measuring. She shared that when other systems piloted fare enforcement, difficult scenarios increased. Commissioner Fernando requested that METRO Transit share information on what they are measuring when evaluating turnstiles, free fares, etc. and provide details on how it assesses the pilot program. Commissioner Fernando also stated she is interested in seeing the relationship between ridership numbers and the cost of fare enforcement.

Commissioner Jeff Lunde, Hennepin County, extended his appreciation for GM Kandaras summary. He stated there are physical differences with our light rail system and this is useful. He shared that the basics do truly matter, and the environment is a visual depiction of how people care about themselves. When the trash is full at our LRT stations, it often gets thrown on the ground. He indicated where we can do better to improve appearance, these small things matter. Commissioner Lunde is not in disagreement or agreement on free fare but asked if we currently charge a fare between airport terminals. Kandaras replied that METRO Transit is providing free fare for people trying to get from one terminal to the other.

Chair Zelle recognized the issue brought up regarding fare compliance and its underlying causes and pointed out that safety and security extend beyond just fare compliance. GM Kandaras shared that there is another element to the transportation omnibus bill involving repair on community centers and work is underway to organize. GM Kandaras added another point, highlighting that workforce shortages are affecting METRO Transit's capability to maintain the cleanliness of the system to the desired standard. Supplemental security has been added at a few locations, with the aim of testing whether this also deters some of the property damage. She added that the environment



is really what sends the signal about how regulated the system is.

Jim Adams, Mayor of the City of Crystal, added a side note that on his way to the meeting he passed a bus stop in poor shape and stated everyone should take a look at this station on the way out.

Council Member Anjuli Cameron, Metropolitan Council, thanked GM Kandaras for providing an update at the CMC. She shared that real live data can be implemented on this project as they have been performing large studies to look at what other systems are like. It is just a matter of coinciding the timing of these studies with the planning of the project.

Suzanne Sobotka, Senior Policy Aide with the City of Minneapolis, inquired how often police officers or nonsworn personnel do education when enforcing fare compliance and if they are trained to talk about the programs available. GM Kandaras answered that METRO Transit has started having the Community Service Officers (CSOs) do fare inspections and when they find someone who is not fare compliant, a citation is issued. She shared that last Monday through this Monday, CSOs did 2000 inspections and issued under 200 citations. METRO Transit has trained the CSOs on fare programs including the Transit Assistance Program (TAP) which is a program for riders who qualify to ride for one dollar. She indicated METRO Transit is seeing this as an opportunity to educate riders how to be fare compliant.

Ricardo Perez of the Blue Line Coalition asked GM Kandaras when the free fare pilot study will end and when data would be available to imagine the possibilities of adopting within the BLE. He suggested directing energy and resources to find innovative ways to solve all problems with new solutions. He believes that free fare is an anti-displacement measure and long-term residents will benefit directly from this. Mr. Perez also emphasized the use of art or murals that will help beautify transit spaces. Mr. Perez stated that fare enforcement feels like something from the past and this project is really looking at a different future. GM Kandaras answered Mr. Perez's question about the free fare pilot study and indicated METRO Transit is required by legislation to run the pilot from July 2023 through December of 2024 and provide a report back to legislation.

Council Member Cameron requested clarification regarding the free fare pilot study routes. GM Kandaras clarified that there are only two routes in the system that are part of the free fare study, and these are fixed routes. She further explained that traditionally riders would pay upon boarding these two routes, however during the pilot, riders do not pay when boarding. METRO Mobility certified riders provide an ID and can ride any route for free.

Commissioner Fernando asked whether riders need to scan a ticket. Kandaras replied that on the two pilot study routes, you do not scan, you just walk on. These two pilot routes are free for everyone. METRO Mobility riders are required to scan their Mobility



ID card on all fixed routes to ride free. Commissioner Fernando stated that the infrastructure is the same whether we charge a fare of \$1 or \$5. Chair Zelle shared that fare revenue is at 25-30% compared to pre-COVID.

## **1. Design Update**

### **a. Lowry Station**

Nick Landwer, Director of Design and Engineering for the Blue Line Extension Project, Metropolitan Council, introduced the following new employees to the BLE Project:

- Shahin Khazrajafari, Deputy Project Director (Hennepin County)
- Kyle Mianulli, Communications Administrator (Hennepin County)
- Ryan Kronzer, Assistant Director of Design and Engineering (METRO Transit)
- Nat Gorham, Transit Director (MnDOT Metro District)
- Richelieu (Rich) Morris, Community Engagement Specialist (Hennepin County)
- Eric Gustafson, Senior Department Administrator, Anti-Displacement, Hennepin County

Mr. Landwer provided an overview of the updated design of Lowry Avenue Station. He stated this is a key station along the alignment as the BLE transitions from Minneapolis into Robbinsdale. This station provides access to the Grand Rounds Trail, Victory Memorial Parkway and North Memorial Hospital. Mr. Landwer shared the original concept was designed to not disrupt the existing infrastructure. The original design concept had the light rail traveling along West Broadway and ramped up to a bridge structure that continued over the southbound lanes of 81 to an elevated platform station (Lowry Avenue Station). Mr. Landwer mentioned this concept has been reviewed at previous meetings so many are familiar with it. He described the many challenges of an elevated station platform. Riders would need to take stairs and/or an elevator to access or leave the station. With the station elevated, it is hidden behind the existing bridges and visually hard to see where and how to access it. A bridge is required with an elevated structure. The physical touchpoint to the park is visually impacted. Overall, there is a lack of stakeholder support for this design.

Mr. Landwer indicated a group was formed of project partners including the City of Robbinsdale, Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board (MPRB), Hennepin County, City of Minneapolis, and BLE project staff to discuss options for improving the design of this area to serve the community better. A revised design concept that is at-grade with the existing bridge structures was presented by Mr. Landwer. He indicated to keep the station at-grade the design team looked at potentially extending the bridge structures farther to the south and doing work on the southbound bridge to make room for the



light rail. In addition, the intersection of Theo Wirth Parkway and Lowry Avenue would be pushed to the east of the bridge to allow light rail underneath. Mr. Landwer explained this provides better access and connections to the parkway and community. He also added that these designs are still just concepts, and the design team has a lot of work yet to do.

Mr. Landwer shared the benefits of keeping the light rail at-grade including improved station access offering more direct routes to the station and providing better access for people of all abilities. This design provides a better connection to North Memorial Hospital from the station platform and provides better station visibility. Overall, Mr. Landwer stated this design will activate the area around the station much better than it is today.

Mr. Landwer highlighted three visuals to better demonstrate the Lowry Station at-grade concept. The visuals depicted the existing bridge structures and showed how light rail would fit in this area. One of the visuals provided a view of the intersection being pushed to the east. Another view looking west from Lowry Avenue towards North Memorial Hospital provided a view of the station platform and where the train would run. Mr. Landwer shared that this design concept allows pedestrians to walk directly to North Memorial Hospital without having to cross the street.

Next steps for the design team include continuing to collaborate with project partners, refine the design, and determine roadway and intersection configurations. The focus will be on access and connectivity in this area as designs are advanced. Mr. Landwer concluded by saying the project staff are listening to project partners and these opportunities have helped the project advance the design as seen today.

Chair Zelle thanked everyone for collaborating on this updated design and stated this new concept was a really big change. Chair Zelle opened this topic to the group for questions.

Meg Forney, President of the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board (MPRB) stated this was very exciting news. She indicated the activation of this area is so opportune and creating placemaking is what it is all about. President Forney shared that she is thinking about Lake Street and Hiawatha and how it feels like a cavern. She suggested when designing this area, to ensure it is an active and vibrant space for people to feel welcome and safe.

Bill Blonigan, Mayor of the City of Robbinsdale, shared from the Robbinsdale perspective, it is ironic that the MPRB has one vote and the City of Robbinsdale has one vote. He conveyed from his city perspective, it is important to be careful about the decision recommended and listen to how each stakeholder feels. Mayor Blonigan stated he liked a lot of things about this new recommended design plan for the Lowry Station but indicated that his city has not had enough input into this in face-to-face meetings.



Mayor Blonigan inquired if he was a pedestrian riding this system, how does this impact the amount of time to be spent getting from my house to the actual station. Mr. Landwer responded that the project could evaluate walking distance to the station and added that the design concept at-grade presented today is not far from the originally designed concept. Mr. Landwer noted that the new design provides easier and better access all around. Mayor Blonigan stated it was a good thing to save construction costs and suggested that if rough estimates regarding cost were shared, they might argue in favor of this plan. He indicated that this information is relevant when making recommendations and votes.

Commissioner Fernando stated that Mayor Blonigan raised a good point that staff generally talks with staff but noted there maybe needs to be more policymaker-to-policymaker discussion. She will flag for next year.

Commissioner Lunde shared that as we enter a new phase toward municipal consent, this would be a good time to set up different standards regarding check-ins with the elected officials. He also suggested that the project treat any change as a big change and bring them to the council.

Perez also shared it is a great idea for the elected to be brought into the loop more regularly and recommend including Anti-Displacement updates to see the progress being made.

## **6. Communications Update**

Kyle Mianulli, Communications Administrator for Hennepin County, shared he has been involved in LRT work for a long time but is excited to now be working full time on the BLE project. Mr. Mianulli presented a communications summary of the BLE project describing the communications delivered in 2023 and the plans for communications going forward in 2024. He pointed out that the standard communication channels utilized throughout the year were newsletters, social media, the project website, and print materials. Mr. Mianulli provided statistics on the usage and engagement of these communication outlets. He stated there is opportunity for growth in the social media platforms and the project has been thinking differently about the content that will be shared. The BLE project website has had over 100,000 visits in the past year, which indicates people are tuning in and finding valuable information. Mr. Mianulli noted that print materials are never overlooked as it is still an effective method to reach a broad audience.

Mr. Mianulli stated that the project team wants more people to engage in this project and one of the ways to grow our audience is through promotional campaigns. In 2023, Hennepin County led two campaigns initiatives: the first one being "Your Community, Your Blue Line," and the second titled "Community Voice". The goal of Your Community, Your Blue Line is to create a sense of ownership for communities, increasing





engagement, and informing the public that now is the time to weigh in, provide input and give the BLE project team opportunities to respond. Mr. Mianulli highlighted that the Community Voice campaign focused on the voices of people in the corridor. He added these were broad campaigns and multiple different platforms were experimented. One of the more novel channels included sharing videos about the BLE project on select gas station TVs. Mr. Mianulli also indicated that the project utilized local and cultural media outlets; advertisements were shared in English and Spanish and geographic areas were targeted along with Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) audiences.

The results were exciting and high-level numbers overall indicated 12.9 million views on the project's advertisements. With digital ads, the BLE project had over 51,000 clicks. Mr. Mianulli shared that the project's advertisements outperformed industry averages in cost per click and click-through rates. This is an indication that people are interested and engaged. He provided a sample of the wide variety of outlets the project partnered with.

Mr. Mianulli shared a video created by the communities, which highlighted community testimonial that were produced in 2023, the video can be viewed [here](#). Mr. Mianulli stated the message shared was "it is about more than the train; it is about the people".

Mr. Mianulli shared the plans for communications for 2024. He stated the project would like to highlight the voices along the corridor by doing more community storytelling and finding interesting examples of how the people see this line fit into their community. He added the campaign work will be refined and more focused geographically. Through digital strategies, Mr. Mianulli mentioned we can target messages and answer questions directly and activate community audience to be a part of the project and provide input. He also added another way to grow community audience is to create more ways for people to connect with the project. Currently the messages shared are often long, wordy and can be technical which makes the communication very difficult to engage with. With a project of this scale and complexity, it can be challenging to share information effectively and provide feedback that is reflective of the people's needs. Mr. Mianulli indicated more video content will be produced in English, Spanish and other languages. He added a Podcast is underway to share detailed information and will offer challenging conversations about the BLE project that doesn't require people to have 15 minutes to sit down and read a long report. Mr. Mianulli reported that the project continues building community partnerships and will seek other photographers and videographers to partner with. Traditional communication channels will continue to be leveraged, and reassured the CMC members that the project will be looking at different ways to utilize more storytelling content, investigating new tactics and strategies to employ. Mr. Mianulli shared the project team will convene with the cities and communities' communications



experts on a regular basis to coordinate and collaborate. He added media remains a reliable way to reach a very broad audience and productive relationships will be fostered with local media to share accurate project information.

Council Member Reva Chamblis, Metropolitan Council expressed her appreciation for all the innovative communications channels utilized. Council Member Chamblis noted that she has received comments from businesses and community members that they would like updates on the project, and suggested Mr. Mianulli include something in the communications strategy as a way for businesses, homeowners, and community members to obtain updates on what has been happening. Council Member Chamblis mentioned maybe newsletters could be dropped off at local storefronts. Mr. Mianulli acknowledged the comment and agreed that businesses are a key audience.

Commissioner Lunde shared that pre-COVID everybody went to work, during COVID many stayed home with the exception of those who are required to work because of their job. Now as we exit COVID, the riders are the same workers who had to keep working. He stated we may fail to convince people that transit is important. Commissioner Lunde suggested the project aim to market to the people who are current riders as they are the best audience to share their stories and why they like riding transit.

Council Member Cameron expressed the strategies presented are wonderful and appreciated all the different ways Communications uses to reach out to the local communities. She also mentioned the video was great in terms of messaging and seeing familiar faces. Council Member Cameron stated Council Member Chamblis's comments are also important around content updates. She suggested that the project think not only about responding to the questions asked but also to the questions that have not been asked. There may be knowledge gaps and some people don't know what to ask about the project or understand what is important to them. Council Member Cameron asked that the strategy include helping people better understand the project, the project timeline, and that there are still opportunities to engage in the planning process. She shared that all these elements are important when thinking about media cultural strategies.

## **7. Anti-Displacement Update**

Cathy Gold, Hennepin County, provided an update on Anti-Displacement Working Group (ADWG) efforts and the Corridor Partnership collaboration. She indicated ADWG have a legislative platform for 2024 that was developed together as a collective process. Ms. Gold shared that ADWG has been working on the Anti-Displacement workplan (framework) that the CMC requested to develop. A comprehensive list of subject matter experts who can help with each of the topic areas is being gathered. Ms. Gold indicated that the ADWG are reviewing existing programs, policies, and resources that exist today,



to compare and prepare action steps to achieve the Anti-Displacement Resolution Recommendations. Ms. Gold added that the ADWG are performing technical analysis and identifying who will be the best organization to partner with when rolling out these Anti-Displacement programs to the communities. In addition, existing and additional funding possibilities are being identified and they are determining the actions that need to happen for new policies and programs.

Ms. Gold reported that the ADWG next meeting with the Corridor Partnership is scheduled for January 25, 2024.

Ms. Gold explained the outcomes received; the topics developed are the basis for starting to organize the chapters of the workplan framework. She then described the workplan framework matrix which arranges the topics into buckets to better understand what is inside of the project, what is outside of the project, and the timing for when each of these will happen. Ms. Gold stated we know we need to engage and do our outreach a little differently and there will be additional efforts with engagement. Ms. Gold also shared a draft document that will be ready for review in first quarter 2024.

Council Member Chamblis shared she feels encouraged to see the Anti-Displacement timeline in almost every presentation. She expressed that she would like to challenge the ADWG to consider pushing some of the resolution topics sooner in the timeline such as small business support. In addition, Council Member asked the ADWG to consider entities and people who are under-resourced, and continue to be economically-disadvantaged, by providing them the opportunity to respond and advocate for themselves. She added that the funding mentioned on the previous page be included on this timeline as something that should happen now to prepare neighborhoods for capacity building.

Mr. Perez stated it is good to see how the Anti-Displacement work is being delivered. He mentioned that in the past he remembers seeing a timeline where the Anti-Displacement work was moving along the project timeline. He suggested that the ADWG always be intentional with this, otherwise, it will start to look like a separate initiative. He added it is good to use similar language such as before, during or after construction, so everyone can make the connection.

**8. Next Meeting: January 11, 2024**

**9. Adjourn**

Chair Zelle concluded the meeting and adjourned it at 3:03 pm. He stated that the next meeting was scheduled for January 11, but the meeting will be canceled as there will be no sub-meetings prior to that.

Next meeting will be February 8, 2024, same time, and location.