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## University Avenue wins 3 more train stops

Residents rallied for them; now the U.S. transportation chief makes it official: The Central Corridor light-rail will stop at Hamline, Victoria and Western, too.

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Proposed Central Corridor light-rail line connecting downtown St. Paul to downtown Minneapolis. (Pioneer Press)



U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood shares a lighter moment with Sen. Amy Klobuchar at Monday's news conference in St. Paul announcing three additional Central Corridor light-rail stops along University Avenue. Below, an architectural rendering shows what a platform along the line might look like. (Pioneer Press: Chris Polydoroff)

The neighborhood needs were always there. The

political will was there, too, and growing rapidly over the past several weeks.

Now, the money's there, and it's official: The proposed Central Corridor light-rail line will stop three more times along its 11-mile route between St. Paul and Minneapolis.

In a celebratory news conference Monday on University Avenue in St. Paul, a host of leaders led by U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, U.S. Sen. Amy Klobuchar, U.S. Rep. James Oberstar and St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman announced that the federal government would pay half of the \$15.6 million to build the additional University Avenue stations at Hamline Avenue, Victoria Street and Western Avenue.

And, officials announced, they have figured out how to fund the other half through a combination of sales and property tax funds and private donations.

Those three stations, which had been in the "we'll-get-to-them-later" category, for years have been a rallying cry for neighborhood groups. The groups, which included chambers of commerce, district councils and minority groups, argued that businesses and residents, especially lower-income residents who depend on mass transit, were being bypassed by a roughly \$1 billion project they'd be able to see but not benefit from.

Without the three stations, the route would have had gaps of up to a mile between stations, and because bus service will be reduced when trains start rolling as soon as 2014, many complained they would be worse off after the train than today.

"This is a true concrete victory," said Metric Giles, a facilitator for the Stops for US Coalition, an assemblage of 35 groups representing various

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interests along University that coalesced behind the cause. "We substantiated the fact that we needed the stops. The next question was how to do it. Now, we've done that."

The door was opened for the addition of the three stations this month when LaHood, a former Republican congressman appointed by President Barack Obama, essentially repealed a practice used by the Bush administration to cap costs on federally funded mass-transit projects. The cost cap had allowed the three stations to be "roughed in" but not built, an outcome one of LaHood's top deputies called "ludicrous."

LaHood and other officials on Monday credited the local groups along University with not giving up. "You've all stuck together, and this is a lesson for people all over America," he said. "If you work together, you can get things done."

Several Democrats at the event credited Obama, because without his election, they said, the stations would not have been allowed.

"Elections matter ... that's what you're proving here," said Oberstar, who chairs the powerful House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

St. Paul City Council member Melvin Carter III, who lives close to the intersection of University and Western, described Monday's announcement as a "huge victory," but, he cautioned, challenges still confront the University Avenue stretch of the project.

Minority groups have filed federal civil rights complaints, and an alliance of African-American groups filed a federal lawsuit charging the project violated social justice requirements and principles.

Those complaints, which are not expected to be withdrawn in the wake of Monday's news, were on the minds of many elected officials. "This community knows all too well what can happen," said Mayor Chris Coleman, referring to the construction of Interstate 94 that split the largely African-American Rondo neighborhood.

For several groups, especially business operators, the three stations are welcome, but the highest priorities are for a solution to the expected loss of nearly all street parking and creation of a fund to help cash-strapped businesses suffering loss of patronage during construction.

"We're happy for these stations but very disappointed there's been no movement on these other issues," said Jack McCann, president of the University Avenue Business Association.

Giles agreed that Monday's news doesn't end the pressure for more, including protections against gentrification forcing residents out of their homes. "If we have the three stops without these other issues, then it's all meaningless," he said.

In the past few days, local officials completed the puzzle of the \$7.8 million in local funds needed to build the stations. Last week, Metropolitan Council Chairman Peter Bell said Gov. Tim Pawlenty, who appointed him, likely would not approve any more state money.

St. Paul previously had committed \$5.2 million, to be paid from a combination of loans and assessments for property owners.

Officials said the remaining \$2.6 million will come this way:

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\$1.56 million from the Counties Transit Improvement Board, a group of metro counties that distributes proceeds from a metro-wide sales tax. The board has yet to vote.

\$520,000 from the Ramsey County Regional Railroad Authority's property tax levy.

\$520,000 from the Central Corridor Funders Collaborative, a coalition of foundations that have raised more than \$5 million to help groups affected by the Central Corridor.

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