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2010 is getting down to wire on Central Corridor

This is the year for everyone to get on board with the Central Corridor light-rail project, according to many involved with the nearly \$1 billion plan to connect the downtowns of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

Important deadlines lie ahead this year, and if squabbles can be squashed, the federal government just might cut a check to pay for half of the project.

But if peace can't be reached, construction gets pushed back and costs rise by millions of dollars. Right now, trains are expected to roll in 2014.

"We are shaving this exceedingly close," said Metropolitan Council Chairman Peter Bell. His agency is leading the project, which is being monitored by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA).

Approval to enter into final design is expected to happen in late February. That's when the last details get worked out, bid packages are prepared and construction plans are finalized. Work has already begun in downtown St. Paul to move utilities underneath the streets.

Perhaps most important is the expected announcement of funding slated for the end of June. The so-called Full Funding Grant Agreement is a contract between the FTA and Central Corridor planners that defines the schedule, scope and cost of the project. It also lays out the maximum amount of money the federal government is to pay,

Bill Harper, chief of staff for Rep. Betty McCollum, D-Minn., said the project is very much a priority of the federal government.

However, local disagreements -- which are expected in large projects such as the Central Corridor -- must be fixed before any final approval is given.

Three major flaps could jeopardize the project's timeline.

One is a dispute between the University of Minnesota and Met Council over how to deal with the effects of rail cars on sensitive lab equipment. The U sued in September to keep its options open, and negotiations have been happening since. Despite the number of talks, a December deadline for resolution was missed.

"We have made substantial progress in many

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areas," said Kathleen O'Brien, vice president for university services.

The other two disputes are civil rights complaints filed with the FTA. Although filed by separate groups last spring and fall, the complaints are related in that both allege the Met Council either didn't study or ignored potential negative effects of the line on minority groups and businesses. About 46 percent of residents along the line are Asian, black or Hispanic, a concentration of minorities that is more than double the minority population in the region.

The Met Council has said that it has been inclusive, holding more than 1,000 public meetings, and that the FTA already approved the environmental justice study.

FTA investigations are pending on both complaints.

Elected officials at the federal level, such as U.S. Rep. Jim Oberstar, the Minnesota Democrat who's in charge of the House Transportation Committee, have kept their distance.

"Our office has met with the parties and been apprised of what's been going on," said John Schadl, Oberstar's spokesman. "We see

disagreements about moving forward, but no disagreement about the need to move forward -- that's a very positive indicator."

Though not now a threat to the project's timeline, there is concern among hundreds of business and property owners along University Avenue as they prepare for significant interruptions to their operations because of construction. They're bracing for the loss of 85 percent of on-street parking when the line comes.

"There's a general sense of anxiety due to the timeline they're facing and the unknowns they're facing," said Linda Winsor, executive director of the University Avenue Business Association.

She said that many business owners don't feel like their concerns about staying open during construction are being taken seriously and that they want a detailed master plan to outline marketing and preparation efforts, signage, parking and possible compensation for lost business.

The Met Council and various community groups are offering services to help prepare businesses for the project.

Bell acknowledged that the business owners

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have legitimate concerns, but he also pointed out that the project has a limited budget and a lot of demands.

Many affected by the project say they know it's not a matter of *if* the line will come through, but *when* it will come through. At this point, the *when* depends on how soon compromises are reached.

"I'm still optimistic," said Bell, the Met Council leader. "But my optimism is tempered by frustration."

For more information, go to www.centralcorridor.org.

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