

Transit options energize Northside civic engagement



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Hennepin County Commissioner Mark Stenglein, far left, joined other concerned Minneapolis residents at a full-capacity transit meeting last Thursday. Photo by Suluki Fardan.

Metric Giles, the St. Paul-based environmentalist and community organizer, beamed with pride. "This is awesome," he said, addressing a standing room only audience of North Minneapolis residents, business and agency leaders, and politicians who responded to State Rep. Bobby Joe Champion's (DFL-58B) call to consider Light Rail Transit options for North Minneapolis.

Over 250 people overflowed a first space, then a larger space at the University Research and Outreach/Engagement Center (UROC) at 2100 Plymouth Avenue North. "I expected to see a lot of white people here, but to find, instead, a room full of Black people, Asian people and Latino people is awesome. That's what this is all about....all the people being on board," said Giles.

Giles said he was introduced to the concept of Transit Oriented Development (TOD) at a seminar in Utah several years ago. Still, he said, most people are not aware of the opportunities, and the attendant pitfalls and challenges on the near horizon. These transit decisions will shape the long term character of our community.

Martin Luther King, Jr, over 40 years ago, described transportation policy as a major tool of racism. With that statement in mind, said Giles, people should remember the devastating impact of transportation policy in St. Paul's Rondo community, and examine how transportation policy led to dismantling Black business districts in St. Paul and other urban centers nationwide. Transportation policy has been a tool to impede rather than enable wealth creation by us in our own community, he said.

Giles said aggressive civic engagement by community residents is critical, this time around. "Participation is key. Elected officials must know we are present and involved. In St. Paul, at first our community was being defined by other people from outside of our community. They decided who we were. They decided what we needed and what we wanted. They determined what was best for us...all without bothering to consult us in the decisions they were making that would affect us," Giles said.

"We rejected that and decided we must exercise our right and responsibility to define ourselves, to define and support our own interests, and to shape the transportation policy and project that would work for us," he said.

The result was the major announcement last week announcing federal policy changes and fund allocations that support the community demands for LRT Stations that support and serve community residents and business along the Central Corridor LRT that will connect Twin Cities downtowns.

Hennepin County Commissioner Mark Stenglein credited that change in federal policy to 5th District Congressman Keith Ellison.

"Ellison did away with the CEI (Cost Effectiveness Index) rule that prevented development in communities like ours.

This line would not be built under CEI rules. Ellison did away with that," Stenglein said.

Now, "the heart of the matter is that LRT is coming through. This is the start of a journey that will end in a LRT train coming through North Minneapolis. It will be an exciting line. You will love it. We got alternative needs analyses and created several variations for the routes the train might take. Nothing is cast in stone right now and it will be hard to get to the final decision. People will throw dirt on any plan that goes forward. That is what happened with the Hiawatha Line, but look at it now," Stenglein said, noting the Hiawatha Line, the Northstar Train, the Central Corridor, the planned Southwest Transitway, and North Minneapolis Bottineau Transitway form the core access grid connecting within the Metro area, and connecting the Metro to a regional and national high speed transportation system.

Champion agreed. "This is more than a rail line coming through North Minneapolis. We are talking about connecting our neighborhoods to high speed access to Detroit, Chicago, Kansas City and Los Angeles. The plans are already on paper and the money is being allocated. This is bigger than whether the LRT will pass in front of your house. We have to think globally," he said.

Minnesota and North Minneapolis have a unique advantage in exploring and pursuing transportation options, according to Sherrie Pugh Sullivan, Executive Director of Northside Residents Redevelopment Council, (NRRC), the pioneering civic engagement powerhouse for North Minneapolis. Minnesota's senior Congressman, James Oberstar, chairs the House Transportation Committee, on which Ellison serves. Their combined presence and leadership is "formidable and bodes well for North Minneapolis," Pugh-Sullivan said.

At the end of the day, Giles said, "the mission is to create livable communities that provide exceptional housing, education, health care, food, and work, supported by a transportation system that enables the best options for our residents. We have to move beyond negative experiences of the past and fashion futures that bring all these elements together. We have to educate ourselves about the process. You have to know what you want."

Jamil Ford, a design engineer, said it is important that the community clearly define transportation and livability challenges for residents, "and explore how to address those challenges in multiple formats, not just the LRT or just a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) alone strategy.

"We must make sure that everybody is treated fairly," Ford said, noting too often the interests of low income and minority residents get sidelined.

Hennepin Transit Authority engineer, Joe Gladke said in 2000, the Metro Council determined that there should be a LRT system serving North Minneapolis. He said, "When the Hiawatha LRT came online with great success and ridership beyond projections people began to ask, 'Why does South Minneapolis get Light Rail, but North Minneapolis only get buses?'"

The Options:

Bottineau Corridor

The Bottineau Corridor extends between Downtown Minneapolis and North Minneapolis through the Northwest suburbs of the Twin Cities, including Golden Valley, Crystal, Robbinsdale, New Hope, Osseo, Brooklyn Park and Maple Grove.

Population and employment along the corridor is growing and greater accessibility to jobs is needed, as it is a key element to the region's economic development.

Traffic congestion is expected to worsen in the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area through the Year 2030 planning horizon. While transit options currently exist for some travel markets in the study area, transit options for northbound commuters are limited.

The Bottineau Transitway Alternatives Analysis Study identified a range of transitway alternatives that encompass two modes (bus rapid transit and light rail transit) on several different alignments within the study area. Twenty-one transitway alternatives have been evaluated, resulting in nine light rail transit and 12 bus rapid transit alternatives.

Hennepin County Regional Railroad Authority said the twenty-one transitway alternatives were evaluated by how well each alternative address the five project goals and thirty-one related evaluation measures. The five project goals are:

1. Enhance regional mobility

2. Expand the effectiveness of transit within the corridor
3. Provide a cost-effective and financially feasible transportation system
4. Encourage transit-supportive land use and development patterns
5. Support sustainable communities and sound environmental practices

The evaluation measure results are used to compute an overall ranking for each alternative.

The four highest ranked alternatives propose:

Light Rail Transit: From Maple Grove to Downtown Minneapolis along Burlington Northern San Francisco (BNSF) Rail Corridor

- Arbor Lakes Parkway to BNSF to Olson Highway (12 miles)
- Running Time: 26 minutes
- Daily Ridership: 19,500
- Construction Cost: \$885 million

Light Rail Transit: From Brooklyn Park along BNSF Corridor

- West Broadway to BNSF to Olson Highway (12.6 miles)
- Running Time: 28 minutes
- Daily Ridership: 16,500
- Construction Cost: \$932 million

Light Rail Transit: From Maple Grove along Penn Avenue

- Arbor Lakes Parkway to BNSF to Broadway via 36th Street to Penn Avenue to Olson Highway (11.9 miles)
- Running Time: 31 minutes
- Daily Ridership: 18,500
- Construction Cost: \$932 million

Bus Rail Transit: From Maple Grove along BNSF Corridor

- Arbor Lakes Parkway to BNSF to Olson Highway (12 miles)
- Running Time: 31 minutes
- Daily Ridership: 13,000
- Construction Cost: \$464 million

Pugh-Sullivan said , “Residents need to give their input on the LRT to elected officials. The meeting last week provided residents with good base information. Our hope is that people will take that information and study the opportunities. Northside residents will make the best decision for community with comprehensive information. We plan to continue to provide that. NRRC is working with Rep. Champion and we would gladly host another meeting to inform residents.”

While the Jordan neighborhood association has formally endorsed Option 3 above, which is referred to as “D2 , which routes the LRT down Penn Avenue to Olson Highway, Pugh Sullivan said, “At this time the NRRC Board has not taken a position because they want to hear from their fellow residents on this issue.”

She said many people signed up to work on an advisory group to study the issue and formulate recommendations and NRRC will work to promote their open public meetings to the greater community.

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