

POLICY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS PHASE

MEETING #13



MEETING SUMMARY

Date: October 8, 2020
Time: 2:30-4:30 p.m.
Location: Virtual meeting (Zoom)

ATTENDEES

Name	Organization	Present
Committee Members		
Mayor Marylee Abrams	City of Maplewood	X
Randy Anderson	Independent School District 622	
Ruby Azurdia-Lee	Comunidades Latinas Unidas en Servicio (CLUES)	
Paris Dunning	East Side Area Business Association	
Mayor Jo Emerson	City of White Bear Lake	X
Mayor Heidi Gunderson	City of Vadnais Heights	
Monte Hilleman	Saint Paul Port Authority	
Sheila Kauppi	Minnesota Department of Transportation	X
Sheila Kelly	White Bear Area Chamber of Commerce	X
Councilmember Jim Lindner	City of Gem Lake	
Supervisor Scott McCune	White Bear Township	X
Councilmember Kelly Monson	City of Forest Lake	
Liz Moscatelli	Vadnais Heights Economic Development Corp.	X
Patrick Opatz	Century College	
Commissioner Victoria Reinhardt	Ramsey County	X
Rose Sullivan	Gillette Children's Specialty Healthcare	X
Terri Thao	Nexus Community Partners	X
Councilmember Susan Vento	Metropolitan Council	X
Shannon Watson	Saint Paul Area Chamber of Commerce	X
Councilmember Nelsie Yang	City of Saint Paul	X
Alternates		
Councilmember Kevin Edberg	City of White Bear Lake	
Councilmember Bryan Smith	City of Maplewood	
Jon Solberg	Minnesota Department of Transportation	
Pakou Yang	Century College	
Yao Yang	Saint Paul Area Chamber of Commerce	

ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS PHASE POLICY ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING SUMMARY

Agency and Consultant Team Staff

- Andy Gitzlaff, Ramsey County.
- Frank Alarcon, Ramsey County.
- Scott Yonke, Ramsey County.
- Ryan Wilson, Minnesota Department of Transportation.
- Nick Olson, Minnesota Department of Transportation.
- Melissa Barnes, Minnesota Department of Transportation.
- Barbara Howard, Minnesota Department of Transportation.
- Daniel Pena, Metropolitan Council.
- Charles Carlson, Metro Transit.
- Mark Finken, City of Saint Paul.
- Paul Kauppi, City of White Bear Lake.
- Jim Gersema, SRF.
- Alicia Valenti, SRF.
- Jeanne Witzig, Kimley-Horn.
- Rachel Haase, Kimley-Horn.
- Peter DeMuth, HNTB.

Members of the Public¹

- Bob Morse, Community Advisory Committee co-chair.
- Ryan Bauman.
- Leslie Rosedahl.
- Joni Giese.
- Craig Cilley.
- Samuel Wegner.
- Robert Jensen.
- Kathryn O'Brien.
- Lisa Swanson.

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

1. Virtual Meeting Procedures

Chair Emerson reviewed the virtual meeting procedures for the Policy Advisory Committee meeting.

2. Welcome and Introductions

Andy Gitzlaff read the names of the Policy Advisory Committee members, agency staff, project staff and members of the public that were logged in to the meeting.

¹ This list includes members of the public who logged in to the meeting.

ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS PHASE POLICY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

MEETING SUMMARY

3. Recap of Project Update Distributed to Policy Advisory Committee in July

In lieu of a meeting in July, project staff provided an email update to the Policy Advisory Committee. The update was also posted to the project website. Andy Gitzlaff summarized highlights from the July update, including the following:

- The first administrative review draft of the Environmental Assessment was submitted to the Federal Transit Administration on June 17.
- The online station design survey was open at that time. It is now closed, and the feedback received will be reviewed today.
- The Federal Transit Administration awarded the Metropolitan Council a \$1.25 million grant for transit-oriented development at Rush Line stations. Ramsey County will be a subrecipient of the grant.
- The 15 percent plans, which is what the Environmental Assessment is based on, were refined to adjust stormwater locations in Saint Paul and White Bear Lake and update the design on Jackson Street from a dedicated guideway to mixed traffic. The change on Jackson Street is not expected to not affect travel time or station access.
- A ridership workshop was held in May. The project conducted a peer review to make sure the ridership forecast is sound since the Environmental Assessment will include projected ridership.
- A risk workshop was also held in May to look at risks to the project and the probability of those risks occurring. A summary of key findings will be provided at the next Policy Advisory Committee meeting.

4. Public Engagement Update

The Rush Line BRT Project offered an online survey this summer knowing that station design will be a key project element to advance over the next few years. Project staff wanted to hear how people plan to access stations and what amenities and design features they want to see. The survey was available in English, Spanish, Hmong, Karen and Somali and received almost 500 responses. It was promoted via social media, e-newsletters and signs on the Bruce Vento Regional Trail. Alicia Valenti provided a summary of the feedback received:

- Key topics of interest included safety and security at stations, landscaping, bicycle access, enclosed shelters and parking.
- Respondents primarily live in Saint Paul, Maplewood, and White Bear Lake and primarily work in Minneapolis, downtown Saint Paul, Maplewood and White Bear Lake.
- Top features that would encourage Rush Line use include safety at stations, safe pedestrian and bicycle connections and convenient locations for drop-off and pick-up. Other suggestions included more development, easy access, frequent service and accessible parking.
- More than 60 percent of respondents indicated they use transit at least sometimes (respondents were asked to answer this question as if the COVID-19 pandemic were not a factor).
- Top destinations to access using Rush Line include:
 - Work, restaurants, shopping, appointments and residences in downtown Saint Paul.

ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS PHASE POLICY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

MEETING SUMMARY

- Work, restaurants, shopping, residences, Hmong Village and Lake Phalen on the East Side of Saint Paul.
- Residences, medical appointments, shopping and Maplewood Mall Transit Center in Maplewood.
- TCO Sports Garden and nearby shops in Vadnais Heights.
- Residences, restaurants, shopping and recreation in White Bear Lake.
- Walking, biking and park-and-ride are the most popular modes of accessing Rush Line.
- Respondents said they would primarily use Rush Line for special events, rush hours and weekend afternoons.
- Secure bicycle parking, wayfinding signage, public art and landscaping are the most desired additional amenities and features.
- Priorities for the boarding experience include cleaning, repair and snow clearance at stations, followed by level boarding and offboard fare collection.
- Other comments indicated an interest in potential private property impacts, changes to the Bruce Vento Regional Trail, desired pedestrian improvements, station size and siting, and access to destinations including Hmong Village and the Gateway State Trail.

The project has also recently received comments via email regarding interest in pedestrian improvements in the East Side of Saint Paul and White Bear Lake, concern about impacts to the Bruce Vento Regional Trail and perceived lack of need for the project in light of changes in travel patterns due to COVID-19. Additional input about business access and transit (BAT) lanes was also received from businesses near Robert & 10th Streets in Saint Paul.

Supervisor McCune asked if the risk assessment workshop took COVID-19 into account as a potential risk that needed to be assessed. Frank Alarcon replied that the risk workshop did consider COVID-19 as a risk. The long-term effect on travel patterns is unknown and will be monitored as planning continues. Transit is expected to continue to be an important transportation option for people in the future. Supervisor McCune stated that he would like to find out how COVID-19 has impacted travel on other BRT systems around the country and how it impacts ridership projections. Frank replied that Metro Transit has been monitoring local ridership trends, and project staff can collect information at a local and national scale and provide that follow up to the committee.

Mayor Abrams noted that she had a conversation with Laura Keithahn, a vice president at St. John's Hospital, that she wanted to share. Bethesda is now a COVID-19 hospital and will be closing. Ramsey County is working on a lease agreement to instead use the facility to house people experiencing homelessness. The emergency room at St. Joseph's Hospital in downtown Saint Paul will be closing at the end of the year, and the heart unit and neonatal intensive care unit will be transferred to St. John's Hospital. Staff that do not deal directly with patients are working from home, and those areas of St. John's will be refitted to house the new heart unit and neonatal intensive care unit. Laura said she expected the usage of Rush Line BRT at the St. John's Boulevard station will see a considerable increase because the two units being transferred there are very active, and Rush Line will be a welcome resource for people.

Commissioner Reinhardt added that the county board is expected to vote on the lease agreement for Bethesda next Tuesday. Fairview is working on redeploying the 900 employees to be laid off because they have 1,200 openings. It is expected that a number of the openings to be filled will be at St. John's.

ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS PHASE POLICY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

MEETING SUMMARY

Councilmember Yang thanked project staff for their public engagement efforts and ensuring different communities have access to information and opportunities to provide input. She asked if we knew the demographics of the station design survey respondents and if the survey was completed in multiple languages. Alicia Valenti replied that the survey did not ask for demographic information, and no responses were received in languages other than English. Councilmember Yang encouraged project staff to gather more demographic data in the future so we can do more intentional outreach if needed.

Councilmember Vento asked if the project is getting any feedback regarding transportation for education purposes, specifically for Century College and Metro State. Rush Line might be a more affordable option for students, but they would need connecting transportation. Related to Councilmember Yang's question about demographics, transit is critically important to seniors. Sharing any demographics related to senior feedback would be helpful. Andy Gitzlaff replied that connections to Metro State and Century College are important considerations, and Century College does have a representative on the Policy Advisory Committee. There is an existing connecting bus route between Maplewood Mall and Century College that could be improved, and there is service to Metro State on the Route 54. Background bus network changes will be evaluated more closely about two years before Rush Line operations begin. Project staff can go back and look at previous engagement efforts to try to pull out senior input.

5. Community Advisory Committee Update

Bob Morse, the Community Advisory Committee co-chair, provided a recap of the Community Advisory Committee virtual meeting on August 24. That was the Community Advisory Committee's ninth meeting overall and second virtual meeting since pandemic began. The Community Advisory Committee heard updates on engineering and environmental activities and the station design survey. The Community Advisory Committee helped create the survey, and topics of interest to committee members were safety and security, bicycle and pedestrian access, and parking. Safety and security are things many people have brought up and being able to safely walk and bike to stations is very important. The Community Advisory Committee also talked about the transit-oriented development grant the project received. The next virtual meeting is scheduled for December 8.

6. Federal Transit Administration Transit-Oriented Development Planning Grant Update

Frank Alarcon noted that Ramsey County and the Metropolitan Council received notice from the Federal Transit Administration this summer that they received a grant to do further station area planning, including community engagement and technical analysis for the half-mile area around stations. This effort will look at how to put more density, housing and jobs near stations and improve walking and biking to make them areas where people want to go.

Ramsey County is working with city partners on the scope of work and is looking to release the request for proposals in 2021. The planning process will be a two-year process that will largely coincide with design advancement for the Rush Line project.

7. Environmental Update

Jeanne Witzig stated that the Environmental Assessment is currently going through the review process with the Federal Transit Administration. Those reviews started in June, and we recently received comments from the Federal Transit Administration's second review. After project staff update the Environmental Assessment to address the comments received, it will start the Federal Transit Administration's legal review process, which will take us into early 2021.

ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS PHASE POLICY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

MEETING SUMMARY

The goal with the Environmental Assessment is to make it as readable as possible, and there are many technical reports that will accompany the document for those wanting more detail. The Environmental Assessment will be available for public review roughly in the February/March 2021 timeframe. Project staff are working with the Federal Transit Administration to finalize the overall schedule for the environmental review process. It is important that the Environmental Assessment and Section 106 process work together to make it as efficient as possible to share information with others. As part of the public environmental review period, the project will hold public meetings that we anticipate will be virtual. Project staff are already working on ways to get the word out on meetings and make them as effective and accessible as possible. The final environmental decision from the Federal Transit Administration is anticipated in summer 2021.

The Section 106 process evaluates historic resources in the corridor. We have gone through an evaluation of resources to determine which are historic and are now in the process of determining effects to those historic resources. The Minnesota Department of Transportation Cultural Resources Unit prepared the draft assessment of effects and is now working through the Federal Transit Administration's comments. A consulting party meeting was held to walk through the initial evaluation process, and we anticipate holding a second consulting party meeting in mid-November. The focus of that meeting will be on the assessment of effects and introducing the approach to how to address those effects. Consulting parties include the cities in the corridor, Saint Paul Historic Preservation Commission, White Bear Township, State Historic Preservation Office, Metropolitan Council, US Army Corps of Engineers, Federal Highway Administration, White Bear Historical Society, Maplewood Historical Society, and several entities specific to the railroad corridor. The consulting party members have been expanded based on input from the initial part of the process.

Given the anticipated right-of-way use approval for the proposed bridge across I-694, the Federal Highway Administration will need to issue its own environmental decision for the Rush Line BRT Project. The Federal Highway Administration's area of jurisdiction is limited to the I-694 crossing. Project staff are working to make sure that what is included in the Environmental Assessment meets the Federal Highway Administration's requirements, in addition to the Federal Transit Administration's, so that the Federal Highway Administration can issue its environmental decision right after the Federal Transit Administration. The Federal Highway Administration was invited to be a cooperating agency and they were given a courtesy review of the Environmental Assessment before it goes out for public review. The Federal Highway Administration does not have jurisdiction over the proposed Highway 36 crossing but has an interest in it because it is on the National Highway System.

Terri Thao asked if business mitigation was included in the environmental review. Jeanne Witzig replied that the Environmental Assessment does look at social impacts, such as right-of-way acquisitions, access to businesses and parking, to get at impacts to businesses and other types of land use.

8. Engineering Update

Jim Gersema provided an update on engineering activities. Project staff are continuing to meet virtually with stakeholders, and recent coordination activities have included utility coordination, working with Metro Transit on the future conceptual bus network, and continue to work with the Minnesota Department of Transportation on the layout process for improvements on state facilities.

The project has received municipal resolutions of support on the 15 percent plans from Saint Paul, Maplewood, Vadnais Heights, White Bear Lake and White Bear Township, which is what is reviewed in the Environmental Assessment.

ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS PHASE POLICY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

MEETING SUMMARY

One recent change to the 15 percent plans is related to the intersection of the Bruce Vento Regional Trail and the Gateway State Trail. Previously a trail roundabout was shown on either side of the guideway. Through coordination with the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources as owner and operator of Gateway State trail, the design was refined to a more traditional “T” intersection.

While the Environmental Assessment is being prepared, project staff are looking at design refinements throughout the corridor and additional refinements will be reflected in future 25 or 30 percent plans.

Project staff are continuing to coordinate with the Minnesota Department of Transportation on stations on Highway 61 regarding platform height, vertical station elements and location in the clear zone. The 15 percent plans reflect a 10-inch platform height, and project staff are working through options for station design with the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

Project staff are also advancing the stormwater analysis, and part of that is coordinating with the Capitol Regional Watershed District and Lower Phalen Creek Project.

Other upcoming engineering activities include submitting the remaining layouts to the Minnesota Department of Transportation, preparing preliminary bridge plans for Minnesota Department of Transportation review, and refining ridership forecasts and capital and operating cost estimates for inclusion in the Environmental Assessment. Ridership and cost estimates will be shared with the Policy Advisory Committee and other advisory committees before being published in the Environmental Assessment.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Lisa Swanson

Lisa Swanson asked if the impact on people that live right on the corridor is included in the environmental assessment and if there is going to be a time when people can see what the plans are for landscaping and such. Lisa lives right on the Bruce Vento Regional Trail so this is literally in her backyard and understanding impacts is important.

Andy Gitzlaff said the latest plan set is on the project website. Project staff can share the link with Lisa to see where the project is in relation to her property. The Environmental Assessment includes noise, vibration, air quality, lighting and many other topics and will be publicly available early next year. Frank Alarcon added the Ramsey County Rail Right-of-Way Design Guide discusses what the Ramsey County rail right-of-way will look like. He will send the link to the design guide in a private Zoom chat. If Lisa has further questions, she can email info@rushline.org or a submit comment on the project website.

Craig Cilley

Craig asked if there is an established detour during construction for those that use the Bruce Vento Regional Trail for commuting and if there is an update on the extension of the Bruce Vento Regional Trail north of Buerkle Road.

Andy Gitzlaff said that the trail will be detoured, it will not be closed, but the exact route has not yet been determined. The Bruce Vento Regional Trail extension from Buerkle Road to downtown White Bear Lake is being led by Ramsey County Parks and is in the planning process. Requests for state and federal funding for the extension are currently pending.

NEXT MEETING

November 19, 2020
2:30-4:30 p.m.
Virtual meeting