

POLICY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS PHASE

MEETING #14



MEETING SUMMARY

Date: January 21, 2021
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	X
Mayor Jo Emerson	City of White Bear Lake	X
Councilmember Erik Goebel	City of Vadnais Heights	X
Monte Hilleman	Saint Paul Port Authority	
Sheila Kauppi	Minnesota Department of Transportation	X
Sheila Kelly	White Bear Area Chamber of Commerce	X
Supervisor Scott McCune	White Bear Township	X
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	
Terri Thao	Nexus Community Partners	X
Councilmember Hanna Valento	City of Forest Lake	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 Rebecca Cave	City of Maplewood	
Councilmember Kevin Edberg	City of White Bear Lake	
Jon Solberg	Minnesota Department of Transportation	
Pakou Yang	Century College	
Yao Yang	Saint Paul Area Chamber of Commerce	

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Agency and Consultant Team Staff

- Andy Gitzlaff, Ramsey County.
- Frank Alarcon, Ramsey County.
- Scott Yonke, Ramsey County.
- Brian Isaacson, Ramsey County.
- Sara Pflaum, Minnesota Department of Transportation.
- Nick Olson, Minnesota Department of Transportation.
- Melissa Barnes, Minnesota Department of Transportation.
- Barbara Howard, Minnesota Department of Transportation.
- Kathryn Hansen, Metropolitan Council.
- Charles Carlson, Metro Transit.
- Chelsa Johnson, Metro Transit.
- Alice Messer, City of Saint Paul.
- Jim Gersema, SRF.
- Alicia Valenti, SRF.
- Steve Wilson, SRF.
- Jeanne Witzig, Kimley-Horn.
- Rachel Haase, Kimley-Horn.
- Tom Harrington, Kimley-Horn.
- Craig Lamothe, HNTB.

Members of the Public¹

- Bob Morse, Community Advisory Committee co-chair.
- Ben Johnson.
- Darren Tobolt.
- Dave Anderson.
- Bob Jensen.
- Doug Cook.
- Fran Knothe.

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

1. Virtual Meeting Procedures

Chair Emerson called the meeting to order, and Andy Gitzlaff reviewed the virtual meeting procedures for the Policy Advisory Committee meeting.

2. Welcome and Introductions

Chair Emerson welcomed the new Policy Advisory Committee members in attendance, including Councilmember Hanna Valento from Forest Lake and Councilmember Erik Goebel from Vadnais

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

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Heights. Chair Emerson also noted that Councilmember Rebecca Cave is the new alternate for the city of Maplewood. Andy Gitzlaff read the names of the meeting attendees.

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

In lieu of a Policy Advisory Committee meeting in November, project staff shared a written update with committee members. The update included information on the Federal Transit Administration review process for the Environmental Assessment, development of the Visual Quality Manual, project coordination activities with the issue resolution teams and partner agencies, and engineering activities including the layout review process, Highway 61 station design and project ridership forecasts.

At the October Policy Advisory Committee meeting, questions came up about engagement with older adults and the impacts of COVID-19 on transit ridership. Project staff sent information on those topics to committee members with the November update.

4. Community Advisory Committee Update

Bob Morse, Community Advisory Committee co-chair, provided a recap of the December Community Advisory Committee meeting. The committee discussed public engagement efforts over the course of the project and project design elements including red paint on the dedicated guideway and Highway 61 pedestrian improvements. The committee also received an update on the Environmental Assessment and where it is in the review process. Bob noted that the committee learned that 28 historic properties were identified, and members were interested to learn more about what was found. The advanced station area planning efforts were also discussed, and safety and adequate lighting are priorities for committee members. They are interested in the possibility of including QR codes at stations to provide more information about the community and nearby points of interest. Other topics covered included ridership changes during COVID-19, the Visual Quality Manual and station site design.

5. Project Updates

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND AGENCY COORDINATION

Recent coordination efforts have been focused on the Federal Transit Administration as they review the Environmental Assessment. Project staff have also closely coordinated with Metro Transit on that process. Coordination with the Minnesota Department of Transportation on engineering will be discussed later in the meeting. The project area municipalities have been engaged with the issue resolution teams on stormwater design, station site design and other topics.

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT UPDATE

The Environmental Assessment has been in process for a while, so Jeanne Witzig wanted to step back and review what it is. An Environmental Assessment tells the story of a project, its goals and how decisions have been made regarding the alternatives evaluated. It studies natural and social elements, and if negative impacts are anticipated it identifies what mitigation measures should be incorporated as the project advances.

The Rush Line Environmental Assessment evaluates two alternatives. One is the No Build Alternative, which serves as a baseline for comparison. The other is the Build Alternative, which is the full corridor from downtown Saint Paul to downtown White Bear Lake including the 15-mile BRT route, 21 stations and three park-and-rides. The analysis is based off of the 15 percent plans that have been reviewed by the cities and advisory committees.

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The three park-and-rides evaluated include the existing Maplewood Mall Transit Center, a 70-space existing surface lot at the TCO Sports Garden at the County Road E station and a 300-space structure at the Highway 36 station. At the Highway 36 station, 300 spaces would be the maximum. The Environmental Assessment also looks at an option where a platform and drop-off space are provided but no park-and-ride. To provide flexibility in the process, the project is also looking at phasing the parking to reflect what demand for parking might be when the project opens. The park-and-ride could start as a surface lot with the opportunity to expand as demand dictates.

The intent of the Environmental Assessment is to focus on the issues that matter, where there might be impacts and what mitigation might be. It looks at transportation, social and environmental resources that would be impacted or benefitted during construction and during long-term during operations.

The Federal Transit Administration started its review of the Environmental Assessment this summer. It has completed two rounds of administrative review and a legal review. We anticipate the Federal Transit Administration review process to wrap up this spring and the Environmental Assessment to be published and out for a 45-day public review period in May 2021. Project staff are planning for virtual public meetings in June 2021. The final environmental decision by the Federal Transit Administration for the federal process and Ramsey County for the state process is anticipated in fall 2021.

The Federal Highway Administration has also conducted a review of the draft Environmental Assessment due to their jurisdiction over I-694. The Federal Transit Administration also coordinated with the US Environmental Protection Agency to conduct a review.

Concurrently with the Environmental Assessment review process, project staff are working collaboratively with the Minnesota Department of Transportation Cultural Resources Unit on the cultural resource review process known as Section 106. The project hosted two Section 106 consulting party meetings at the end of 2020 to review the assessment of effects and discuss how to resolve adverse effects. The Cultural Resources Unit is currently drafting the Section 106 Memorandum of Agreement, which documents how adverse effects to cultural resources could be addressed as the project moves forward. The Federal Transit Administration will conduct a second legal review of the Environmental Assessment and the Memorandum of Agreement before the regional administrator signs the document.

After the project reaches the end of the environmental process in the fall of 2021, the project design will continue to advance. As design advances, the project footprint is anticipated to get smaller and impacts become less, so identified mitigation measures will be refined and the project will move forward with applying for permits and approvals needed from various agencies.

Shannon Watson asked if any lag time is anticipated in the Environmental Assessment review process with the change in administration. Jeanne Witzig replied that the Federal Transit Administration is focused on keeping things moving along and meeting the schedules that have been laid out. They are committed to moving transit projects along as quickly as they can. That said, they do have a thorough and deliberate approach to review to make sure they are comfortable with everything in the document before it goes out for public review.

Andy Gitzlaff noted that project staff are working on a plan for public engagement related to the Environmental Assessment and will provide it to committee members to get their input.

ENGINEERING PLANS

Project staff have been working with the Minnesota Department of Transportation on issues related to the clear zone and platform height along Highway 61. The clear zone is the area that needs to be kept

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free of obstacles. The direction received from Minnesota Department of Transportation Metro District leadership is to move forward with 10-inch platforms adjacent to the business access and transit (BAT) lane. A wider platform design will provide more space for pedestrian elements to be located farther from the highway. At the Whitaker Street station, there were concerns about buses stopping in the travel lanes so changes were made to the proposed roadway configuration and southbound platform location. The BAT lane was extended in the southbound direction so buses can exit the travel lane to stop at the platform without blocking traffic. To find room for the shoulder space for buses to stop, the shift in the roadway and the median were adjusted in coordination with the Highway 61 Issue Resolution Team and Minnesota Department of Transportation and White Bear Lake staff.

Project staff are continuing to coordinate with the Minnesota Department of Transportation on the staff approved layouts for the portions of the corridor where the project interacts with state roadways. The Minnesota Department of Transportation is also reviewing preliminary bridge plans. The issue resolution teams are looking at station site designs in more detail and discussing maintenance and ownership of project elements.

Project staff have also been coordinating on the Phalen Creek daylighting feasibility study with the Lower Phalen Creek Project, Capitol Region Watershed District, city, county and Payne-Phalen District Council. The study was completed in December and validated the opportunities identified in the Rush Line's 15 percent concept plans in two locations along Phalen Boulevard to accommodate aspects of the daylighting proposal in the Rush Line project's stormwater design.

Liz Moscatelli noted that she gets the most comments and questions about the Highway 61 and County Road E intersection and asked if pedestrians will still have to cross Highway 61. Jim Gersema replied that the design includes both the northbound and southbound platforms on the south side of the intersection, which is where the pedestrian improvements are concentrated. Pedestrian safety features have been incorporated into the design such as shortening the crossing distance, including a median refuge, making the crosswalks wider and more visible to motorists, and eliminating right-turn islands which will slow down right turning cars.

6. Project Management Update

The updated ridership and cost numbers presented today are based on the 15 percent plans. These numbers will be included in the Environmental Assessment, and this is an opportunity for Policy Advisory Committee members to understand what goes into those numbers.

RIDERSHIP FORECAST

The ridership forecast used the Federal Transit Administration's STOPS model, which was developed for projects like this and is used for projects across the country. It is local data-driven, so it is based on known conditions and behaviors. It looks at station locations, connecting transit service and growth expectations from city and county comprehensive plans. The data used is pre-COVID. Even though travel patterns are unusual right now due to the pandemic, the 20-year forecasts are believed to be resilient due to the varying trip types and destinations along the corridor. As conditions change, people and travel behaviors adapt. There is a steady state to most travel patterns and behaviors, so it is not good practice to assume major long-term changes in response to short-term events. The project conducted a peer review and optimization workshop in May 2020 and refined the forecasts based on input received.

The 2040 ridership is forecast to be 7,400 riders per day. Without the Highway 36 park-and-ride, the ridership is forecast to be 6,700 rides per day. The forecast is generally consistent with what was documented in the Pre-Project Development Study. The forecast estimates that 23 percent of riders

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will be from zero-car households, and that Rush Line will be accessed by a variety of means (27 percent transfers, 31 percent walk access and 42 percent drive/drop-off). Rush Line is also forecast to provide access for both work and non-work trips (54 percent and 46 percent, respectively).

Terri Thao asked if the local data is both geographically and socially/racially representative of the corridor. Steve Wilson replied that Census and American Community Survey data is used. Terri asked if the undercount of certain populations is factored in. Steve replied that the data is supplemented with on-board survey data from Metro Transit, which does provide an accurate representation of transit users. Terri asked if the forecast Rush Line ridership could be compared to the A Line ridership. Charles Carlson stated that pre-pandemic, ridership was 5,000-5,500 on A Line and over 7,000 on C Line. Metro Transit has seen less decline in ridership on BRT routes during the pandemic, even compared to light rail routes.

COST ESTIMATE

The capital cost estimate includes fixed costs to build the project and bring it into revenue service. It includes a fairly high level of contingency at this point (35 percent) since the project is only at 15 percent design. The operations and maintenance cost estimate for the project was developed using the model for Gold Line and Metro Transit's experience on other projects.

The capital cost estimate remained consistent with the estimate from the Pre-Project Development Study. The estimate for the Build Alternative with the Highway 36 park-and-ride is \$474 million and without the park-and-ride is \$457 million. The estimates include inflation and finance charges. Costs are expressed in year-of-expenditure dollars.

Annual operations and maintenance cost is estimated to be approximately \$15 million. This does not include fare box recovery and other revenues.

CAPITAL INVESTMENT GRANT PROGRAM

The Capital Investment Grant program is a discretionary and competitive grant program from the Federal Transit Administration to fund major transit capital investments around the country. There are different programs depending on the size of the project. New Starts is for fixed guideway projects that exceed \$300 million in total capital cost or would receive at least \$100 million in federal funding; this is the program Rush Line falls into.

Projects get rated on a five-point scale from low to high by the Federal Transit Administration at certain milestones as they proceed through the process. Rush Line is not at a point where it will get rated yet, but project staff calculate anticipated ratings at this stage to monitor how competitive the project will be. The first official rating occurs when the project requests entry into engineering, and the second rating is after engineering and before construction when the project applies for a full funding grant agreement.

There are two areas that make up the overall project rating – the project justification rating and the local financial commitment rating.

The project justification rating is largely based on ridership and cost. It includes mobility improvements, cost-effectiveness, environmental benefits and congestion relief. The two other criteria in this rating are land use and economic development. The land use criterion is driven by existing land use conditions, parking supply, pedestrian facilities and affordable housing. The economic development criterion is driven by the robustness of local planning efforts, including transit-supportive plans and policies, plans and policies to maintain and increase affordable housing, and the impact on regional development. The grant the project received for transit-oriented development planning will

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contribute to the efforts evaluated as part of this rating, and the Federal Transit Administration expects to see local progress as the project advances toward construction. The anticipated project justification rating for Rush Line is medium.

The other half of the overall rating is the local financial commitment rating. This rating is based on the current condition of the existing transit system and the commitment of funds beyond federal funds. The anticipated local financial commitment rating for Rush Line is high.

Combining the anticipated project justification rating (medium) and local financial commitment rating (high) gives an anticipated project rating of medium-high, which is a competitive rating.

Terri Thao asked if the cost for Rush Line could be compared to the cost of other BRT projects in the area. Andy Gitzlaff said that locally the best example is Gold Line, which has a capital cost estimate of a little over \$500 million and a comparable number of riders. Gold Line's estimated operating cost is a little less at around \$12 million since it is a shorter route.

7. Visual Quality Manual Overview

The purpose of the Visual Quality Manual is to set the direction for design early on for new project elements and find a balance between consistent Rush Line BRT identity and recognizing local context and character. Project elements included in the manual include station sites, lighting, pavements, bridges/walls, landscaping, fencing, furnishings and signage.

The Visual Quality Manual covers the entire corridor, building on the design guide prepared for the Ramsey County Rail Right-of-Way Design Guide and previous engagement. It considers six distinct and identifiable areas along the route, including downtown Saint Paul, Phalen Boulevard, Saint Paul to Maplewood transition, Maplewood Mall connection, Highway 61 south and Highway 61 north.

The draft design principles for the Visual Quality Manual include:

- Support Rush Line BRT and Metro Transit brand identity.
- Enhance transit rider experience.
- Provide opportunities for locally unique aesthetic expression.
- Highlight existing valued community features.
- Design corridor edges appropriate to adjacent land uses

An example of what is included in the manual is the guideway and trail bridge over Johnson Parkway. The project does not want to reinvent the wheel when it comes to design. The intent is to honor work that has been done before and make sure new improvements fit the context of other bridges along Phalen Boulevard.

Fencing is another element covered in the manual, with different types of fencing identified for different functions and needs such as demarcating right-of-way, at station sites and for visual screening.

Conceptual lighting plans are also included in the manual, showing different lighting types for station areas and the guideway and providing guidance on how much light is needed for these facilities.

The issue resolution teams have reviewed the Visual Quality Manual. It will be provided to the Technical Advisory Committee later this month, then to the Policy Advisory Committee in February. After the advisory committee review is complete, it will be posted to the project website.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Ben Johnson

Ben is a resident of Gem Lake and a recent addition to the Gem Lake city council. He stated that Gem Lake has not signed a resolution of support for the project's 15 percent plans, and he is wondering how to remedy that. He noted that there was a plan to put in a Hy-Vee convenience store across from the proposed park-and-ride at the southeast corner of Highway 61 and County Road E, and that buildings were being removed in that location.

NEXT MEETING

March 18, 2021
2:30-4:30 p.m.
Virtual meeting