

POLICY ADVISORY COMMITTEE

ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS PHASE

MEETING #16



MEETING SUMMARY

Date: July 15, 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
Councilmember Laurel Amlee	City of Gem Lake	
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
Councilmember Erik Goebel	City of Vadnais Heights	X
Monte Hilleman	Saint Paul Port Authority	
Sheila Kauppi	Minnesota Department of Transportation	
Sheila Kelly	White Bear Area Chamber of Commerce	
Supervisor Scott McCune	White Bear Township	
Liz Moscatelli	Vadnais Heights Economic Development Corp.	X
Patrick Opatz	Century College	
Commissioner Victoria Reinhardt	Ramsey County	X
Andrea Stoesz	Gillette Children's Specialty Healthcare	X
Terri Thao	Nexus Community Partners	X
Councilmember Hanna Valento	City of Forest Lake	X
Councilmember Susan Vento	Metropolitan Council	X
Shannon Watson	St. Paul Area Chamber	X
Councilmember Nelsie Yang	City of Saint Paul	X
Alternates		
Councilmember Rebecca Cave	City of Maplewood	
Councilmember Kevin Edberg	City of White Bear Lake	
John Perlich	St. Paul Area Chamber	
Jon Solberg	Minnesota Department of Transportation	X
Pakou Yang	Century College	

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Agency and Consultant Team Staff

- Andy Gitzlaff, Ramsey County.
- Frank Alarcon, Ramsey County.
- Scott Yonke, Ramsey County.
- Sara Pflaum, Minnesota Department of Transportation.
- Sarah Ghandour, Minnesota Department of Transportation.
- Barbara Howard, Minnesota Department of Transportation.
- Charles Carlson, Metro Transit.
- Craig Lamothe, Metro Transit.
- Daniel Peña, Metropolitan Council.
- Jim Gersema, SRF.
- Alicia Valenti, SRF.
- Jeanne Witzig, Kimley-Horn.
- Rachel Haase, Kimley-Horn.

Members of the Public¹

- K Berglund.
- Samuel Wegner.
- Scott Eggert.
- Lauren Lynch.
- Tim David.
- KC Atkins.
- Richard Holst.
- Debra.
- Greg Copeland.
- Gavin Poindexter.
- James Watson.

DISCUSSION SUMMARY

1. Virtual Meeting Procedures

Andy Gitzlaff reviewed the virtual meeting procedures. Mayor Emerson shared the following statement:

After the expiration of the Governor's statewide emergency order, and upon consulting with our legal counsel and reviewing the current status of the COVID-19 infections and vaccinations, we have determined that continued use of remote meetings for the Rush Line Policy Advisory Committee is no longer advised. While there are still legitimate hesitations to the full return of in-person meetings, we must balance the transparency provided by full compliance with the Open Meeting Law with the current risks of the pandemic. Such a review requires our return to in-person meetings. However, due

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

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to the existing planning and notice of the July 15th meeting, it has been decided to make this meeting the last remote meeting under the emergency declaration. Following this meeting, the Rush Line Policy Advisory Committee will return to in-person meetings if additional meetings are needed. There are no additional Policy Advisory Committee meetings scheduled at this time. We will continue to evaluate the prudence of in-person meetings as the situation changes.

2. Welcome and Introductions

Andy Gitzlaff read the names of the committee members and agency and consultant team staff in attendance.

3. Recap of April 2021 Policy Advisory Committee Meeting

At the April Policy Advisory Committee meeting, project staff provided an update on the Community Advisory Committee and preparation for the release for the Environmental Assessment on May 11. Barbara Howard from the Minnesota Department of Transportation Cultural Resources Unit gave an update on the Section 106 process. Project staff also provided an update on engineering coordination activities and an overview of the project's landscape design approach. A meeting summary was provided to Policy Advisory Committee members and is posted on the website.

4. Environmental Update

The Environmental Assessment was published on May 11, and the public comment period lasted until June 25. Three public meetings were held to provide information on the Environmental Assessment, answer questions and receive comments from public. Both online and in-person meeting options were provided.

Online open houses were held June 2 and 3, with one in the afternoon and one in the evening to accommodate people with different schedules. A total of 42 attendees signed in. There was a presentation by project staff, and closed captioning, Spanish, Hmong and Karen interpreters were available. During the question and answer session, questions covered topics including the locally preferred alternative process, vehicle selection, ridership, cost, traffic impacts, operations and maintenance, environmental impacts, public engagement and impacts to the Bruce Vento Regional Trail and within the Ramsey County rail right-of-way. Project staff encouraged people that attended to review the Environmental Assessment and submit formal comments.

The in-person open house was held on June 17 at Union Depot in Saint Paul. It was a three-hour event from 4-7 p.m., and a total of 14 people signed in. There were a series of informational boards, and project staff were available to answer questions. Language services provided included American Sign Language, Spanish, Hmong and Karen interpreters. Attendees could provide written comments or verbal comments to a court reporter. Informal conversations with attendees were on similar topics as those covered at the question and answer sessions of the online meetings.

During the public comment period on the Environmental Assessment, the project received comments from six agencies: US Department of Interior, US Environmental Protection Agency, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, Minnesota Department of Transportation, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency and Capitol Region Watershed District. Copies of these letters will be attached to the environmental decision document that will be published this fall along with responses to each. The project also received 184 comments from members of the public and community organizations. Substantive comments will be grouped into themes, and thematic responses will be provided in the environmental decision document. Project staff are in the process of reviewing comments, and preliminary themes include:

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- General statements of support for or opposition to the project.
- The locally preferred alternative route and mode.
- Impacts of COVID-19 on ridership.
- Project cost.
- Traffic and parking impacts.
- Natural resources.
- Phalen Creek daylighting project.
- Bicycle and pedestrian connections and impacts to the Bruce Vento Regional Trail.
- Engagement activities and tribal consultation.

Some comments received on the Phalen Creek daylighting project referenced whether it should be considered a historic resource and if additional tribal consultation is needed. Project staff are working with the Federal Transit Administration to determine if additional analysis and consultation are needed.

All substantive comments will be responded to in the environmental decision document, which is anticipated to be published in October 2021.

The Environmental Assessment included two options related to the Highway 36 station – no park-and-ride facility or a 300-space parking structure with the possibility it would be phased in. Even though there is a cost to include the parking, it does provide a boost in ridership and serving as many riders as possible is a key goal of the project. The recommendation from project staff and the Technical Advisory Committee is to design for the 300-space structure but start with an approximately 170-space surface lot within that same footprint. This will provide the greatest flexibility as the project advances.

Project staff are working on drafting the environmental decision document. A draft will be provided to the Federal Transit Administration for their first review later in July 2021. This will be followed by another local review and Federal Transit Administration legal review. Project staff anticipate receiving concurrence from Section 4(f) officials with jurisdiction this summer and executing the Section 106 Memorandum of Agreement in early September 2021. The environmental decision document would then go to the Federal Transit Administration for signature in mid-September 2021. Ramsey County then would issue the state environmental decision document in early October 2021. The Federal Highway Administration will also need to issue an environmental decision document due to the crossing of I-694, which is anticipated to also occur this fall.

Commissioner Reinhardt noted that a state negative declaration is included on the schedule and asked what that is. Jeanne Witzig replied that Ramsey County is the Responsible Governmental Unit for the state environmental review process and prepared an Environmental Assessment Worksheet, which was included as an appendix to the Environmental Assessment. The decision after preparation of an Environmental Assessment Worksheet is whether or not an Environmental Impact Statement is needed. Project staff anticipate that Ramsey County will issue a negative declaration on the need for an Environmental Impact Statement.

Andy Gitzlaff asked Jeanne Witzig to clarify if the *EQB Monitor* is a state or federal publication. Jeanne replied that the Environmental Quality Board is a state agency that publishes the *EQB Monitor* each week. The *EQB Monitor* is a vehicle to inform agencies and the public about environmental documents that are available for review or decisions that have been made. The federal and state environmental determinations will be published in the *EQB Monitor*.

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Andy Gitzlaff noted that even though the comment period has closed on the Environmental Assessment, Ramsey County is still accepting questions and comments through the project website and will respond in a timely manner.

Councilmember Yang commented that she wanted to lift up her support for the Lower Phalen Creek Project. She knows the project also received a letter from the Payne-Phalen Community Council and thinks both organizations do amazing work in the community. She wanted to lift up their comments and asked how their comments would be incorporated into the project. Jim Gersema said that over the last two years project staff have met with the Lower Phalen Creek Project and Capitol Region Watershed District to coordinate the projects and evaluate the space in the corridor and where there are synergies between the projects. There are areas where the two projects overlap and work well together. Preliminary stormwater management work has identified where Rush Line stormwater treatment could support the Phalen Creek daylighting project. In other areas there are challenges without additional project acquisitions due to limited space. Coordination will continue as designs move forward for both projects.

5. Section 106 Update (Cultural and Historic Resources)

The Federal Transit Administration, Minnesota Department of Transportation Cultural Resource Unit and consulting parties have been discussing how to mitigate adverse effects to historic properties that would result from the project. The fifth consulting party meeting was held in June 2021 to finalize the measures identified in the Memorandum of Agreement, which include vegetative screening, design requirements and consulting party review of certain project elements, as discussed at previous Policy Advisory Committee meetings. The Memorandum of Agreement also outlines mitigation for the adverse effects to the Lake Superior & Mississippi Railroad Corridor Historic District, which includes data recovery of one of the 1868 railroad roadway alignments, avoidance of two 1868 alignments, completing an evaluation of the Lake Superior & Mississippi corridor from Saint Paul to Duluth after the project is complete to determine if it retains its integrity for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, as well as including interpretive elements at a minimum of three stations.

The Federal Highway Administration and State Historic Preservation Office provided some minor technical edits to the Memorandum of Agreement after the June consulting party meeting. The US Army Corps of Engineers commented that they had no additional changes. The revised Memorandum of Agreement is going through the final review process then will be signed. If the Federal Transit Administration decides additions are needed to address Phalen Creek, those can be added to the Memorandum of Agreement before it is executed, following additional discussion with consulting parties.

6. Engineering Update

Project staff continued to collaborate with the issue resolution teams in 2021 and continued conversations with the city of Saint Paul on maintenance and ownership issues.

Project staff have also prepared layouts for the portions of the project within Minnesota Department of Transportation right-of-way. The Minnesota Department of Transportation has signed the layouts for the Highway 36 and I-694 crossings, and final signatures are in process for Arcade Street and Highway 61.

The Minnesota Department of Transportation also conducted preliminary bridge plan reviews and has signed the plans for all seven bridges proposed as part of the project.

7. Project Development Phase Transition Update

The end of the project's Environmental Analysis Phase is approaching and the transitional period into Project Development is underway. Ramsey County is in the lead agency role through the environmental decisions and is transitioning that role to the Metropolitan Council at the start of Project Development. Craig Lamothe will be Project Director for the Metropolitan Council, and Andy Gitzlaff and other Ramsey County staff will remain involved. The project will be re-branded as the Purple Line when it transitions to the Metropolitan Council.

The transition process Rush Line is following has been used most recently for Gold Line as well as on past rail projects. Ramsey County's ongoing responsibilities will include completing the Environmental Analysis Phase and the Minnesota Department of Transportation and municipal approval processes (where applicable) for highway improvements, as well as making a funding commitment for the Project Development phase. In order to demonstrate to the Federal Transit Administration that the project is ready for the Project Development phase, Ramsey County needs to show there is the necessary funding for the next 24 months.

Initial Metropolitan Council responsibilities will include initiating procurements for consultant contracts to advance the project and preparing for entry into the Federal Transit Administration's Capital Investment Grant Program. The Metropolitan Council anticipates making the request late this summer and hopes to officially be in the Capital Investments Grant Program this fall. The Metropolitan Council will also enter into interagency agreements with Ramsey County and with the Minnesota Department of Transportation. Project committees will be reformed in early 2022, which will coincide with the new consultant team being under contract.

Shannon Watson asked how the transition will affect the Policy Advisory Committee. Craig Lamothe replied that the committees currently in place were organized by Ramsey County, and the Metropolitan Council will implement a similar structure. There will be a Corridor Management Committee rather than a Policy Advisory Committee, which will be chaired likely by the chair of the Metropolitan Council. There will also be technical and community/business advisory committees. Andy Gitzlaff added that the Corridor Management Committee has historically included agency representatives and elected officials only, so Ramsey County is working with the Metropolitan Council on how to keep the project's business and community organization partners engaged.

One aspect of the project that Ramsey County will remain heavily involved in is advanced station area planning. Ramsey County will lead this work, which is funded through the Federal Transit Administration Pilot Program for Transit-Oriented Development Planning grant that the project was awarded last year. It will be an approximately two-year process beginning late this year and ending in 2023. The focus will be on the half-mile area around stations, looking at opportunities for economic development, bike and pedestrian connections and public realm improvements. It will be very collaborative with the project's municipal partners, and there will be lots of coordination between the advanced station area planning and advanced design work. Tasks will include public engagement, real estate and housing gap analysis, station area concepts and development plans, and implementation plans.

Mayor Abrams commented that she has received some emails and communications from residents asking about the decline in ridership on public transit as a result of the pandemic and asking why the project is going forward if ridership is down. She asked if project staff could speak to that question. Andy Gitzlaff replied that this is a long-term investment that looks out to a horizon year of 2040. We do not yet know the long-term ramifications from pandemic, but transit continued to provide an essential service during pandemic. Metro Transit asked people not to use the service for non-

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essential trips. As we start to come out of the pandemic, ridership is increasing, especially on more frequent, all-day service as compared to commuter service. In addition, studies have shown that roughly 60 percent of jobs cannot be done remotely, so there will be a need for transit going forward. Metro Transit will be updating its onboard survey later this year and into next year to better understand changes in travel behavior. Overall, Ramsey County thinks Rush Line is a resilient transit corridor, but as design advances the project will be flexible, and staff will evaluate and bring forward proposed adjustments as design advances.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Commissioner Reinhardt thanked Mayor Emerson for guiding this process as chair of the Policy Advisory Committee. She said the mayor has done a very good job on focusing on what is fact and what is not and moving us forward. She wanted to thank the mayor and other members of the committee for all the work that has been done and recognize that a project like this is complex and requires critical decision making. She thanked Mayor Emerson for her service to the city of White Bear Lake, the region and the state. Mayor Emerson said that it has been a privilege to serve with all the committee members.

Mayor Emerson opened the public comment period. Comments should be limited to 3 minutes and remain relevant to the Rush Line BRT Project. Comments will be included in the meeting summary.

Greg Copeland

Greg attended a meeting of the Ramsey County active living group, and the subject of who owns the Ramsey County rail right-of-way came up. Someone from Ramsey County Public Works was going to look into questions raised about the title status of the actual property. The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources obtained the fee title when it took over the Gateway Sate Trail property, but he did not think that was the case when Ramsey County took over the Bruce Vento Regional Trail. He would like to know the status of county ownership of the rail right-of-way.

Mayor Emerson noted that staff will not respond at this time since it is a public comment period but will get back to him with a response. *(Note: Project staff followed up after the Policy Advisory Committee meeting and confirmed county ownership of the property).*

Kevin Berglund

Kevin said he would like to state for the record that his name is Kevin Berglund and he is a reporter for Citizen Reporter News. He has been trying to follow since the inception of the Policy Advisory Committee and it has been very hard. He has tried to attend numerous Policy Advisory Committee meetings and has provided public comment numerous times and never has staff or anyone else gotten back to him. Second, project staff stated as the meeting began that no recording would be made. It is odd that there has never been a recording made and that shows a deficiency. Next, a lot of these meetings have been more hidden than transparent in manner. It would have aided transparency if they were recorded. The summaries at times have been very inaccurate. The other point he would like to make is that the Policy Advisory Committee has been very politicized and has not been involved with a lot of facts. It has been more pushing of political agendas rather than carefully and analytically looking at facts. When questions have been raised about facts and statistics about community engagement meetings, information has not been available. In many respects, there has been a real lack of attention to getting facts out there in favor of more information. He wanted to thank committee members for their service, but this has not been a good government type of approach to decision-making.

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Scott Eggert

Scott stated that he has been an advocate for the Bruce Vento Regional Trail since the 80s for bike commuting and bike ridership. Residents of White Bear and Mahtomedi are primarily concerned about crime and crime prevention. They are disappointed by what happened to Maplewood Mall and don't want to see that happen again. He realizes the project did an environmental assessment and would appreciate if it considered electric and autonomous vehicles and other future transportation modes. Another concern is if buses will be stored downtown White Bear Lake. It would help to have that somewhere else such as by Highway 96 or Hugo.

CLOSING

Mayor Emerson thanked everyone for joining the meeting and thanked the committee members for their hard work and contributions to this phase of the project. She also extended her thanks to the Technical Advisory Committee, Community Advisory Committee, project staff and consultants. We still have a long way to go and questions to answer, but if we are respectful and listen to each other we can do great things together.