

# MEETING SUMMARY

## POLICY ADVISORY COMMITTEE MEETING #5

**Date:** October 21, 2021  
**Time:** 9:30-11:00 a.m.  
**Location:** Virtual

### ATTENDEES

#### Committee Members

Name	Organization	Present
Mike Barnes	Minnesota Department of Transportation	X
Tyler Blackmon	Community representative	X
Tim Busse	City of Bloomington	X
Kris Fredson	Metropolitan Council	X
Debbie Goettel	Hennepin County	X
Bill Huepenbecker	Saint Paul RiverCentre	X
Pat Mancini	Business representative	X
Terry Mattson	Visit Saint Paul	X
Steffanie Musich	Minneapolis Parks and Recreation Board	X
Rebecca Noecker	Saint Paul City Council	X
Rafael Ortega, Chair	Ramsey County Commissioner	X
Jill Ostrem	United Hospital	X
Bridget Rief	Metropolitan Airport Commission	X
Seth Taylor	Local 563	X
Russ Stark	City of Saint Paul	
Chris Tolbert	Saint Paul City Council	X
Shannon Watson	Saint Paul Area Chamber of Commerce	X

#### Agency and Project Staff

- Frank Alarcon, Ramsey County.
- Jay Demma, consultant team.
- Mona Elabbady, consultant team.
- Sarah Ghandour, MnDOT.
- Joe Gladke, Hennepin County.
- Ken Iosso, Ramsey County.
- Jennifer Jordan, Ramsey County.
- Catherine Judd, consultant team.
- David Kelliher, Minnesota Historical Society.
- Sean Kershaw, City of Saint Paul.
- Jessica Laabs, consultant team.
- Haila Maze, consultant team.
- Sara Pflaum, MnDOT.

- Anna Potter, City of Saint Paul.
- Mike Rogers, Ramsey County.
- Heidi Schallberg, Metropolitan Council.

- Nick Thompson, Metropolitan Council.
- Alicia Valenti, consultant team.
- Lyssa Washington, consultant team.
- Grant Wyffels, consultant team.

## Members of the Public<sup>1</sup>

- John Andrews.
- Dalton Danielson.
- Kevin Gallatin, Community Advisory Committee Co-Chair.
- Peter Grafstrom.
- Jerome Johnson.
- Michael Lamb.
- Joe Landsberger.
- Jane McClure.
- Janet Moore.
- Tim Nolan.
- Jackie Nowak.
- Mark Quam.
- Taylor Riess.
- Joe Scala.
- James Schoettler.
- Jay Severance.
- John Siekmeier.
- Greg Struve.
- Adam Yust.
- One call-in listener.

## DISCUSSION SUMMARY

### 1. Welcome and Introductions

Commissioner Rafael Ortega, committee chair, called the meeting to order. Mike Rogers led introductions.

### 2. Virtual Meeting Procedures and Plan for Future Meetings

Jessica Laabs provided an overview of virtual meeting procedures.

### 3. Station Area Planning Task Force Updates

Frank Alarcon provided an update on recent Station Area Planning Task Force meetings, which have focused on the Saint Clair, Randolph and Otto station areas. Frank also summarized recent and upcoming community engagement efforts related to station area planning.

Frank shared that the Station Area Planning Task Force received a new application from Dave Thune and introduced a requested action to approve Dave's application to join the task force. Chair Ortega entertained a motion to approve the application. Rebecca Noecker moved to approve the application and Tim Busse seconded the motion. All members present at the time voted in favor. (Tyler Blackmon had not joined the meeting at the time of the vote.)

### 4. Ridership and Project Evaluation Update

<sup>1</sup> This list includes members of the public who signed in.

Mike Rogers provided a brief review of information from the Pre-Project Development Study related to the project route and operating environment. He indicated that when the Locally Preferred Alternative (LPA) was adopted in December 2017, project leaders and partners established that the engineering and pre-environmental phase would need to address route and vehicle optimization, analysis of dedicated or shared lanes, cultural and environmental impacts and benefits, streetscaping and station area planning, and potential impacts and benefits for two Build Alternatives: optimized streetcar and best bus. Mike reviewed key considerations for the engineering and pre-environmental work.

Mike said that project staff have been working to update ridership forecasts for the project and that new forecasts are lower than what was shown in the Pre-Project Development Study. Councilmember Noecker asked if the new forecasts would be shared. Mike confirmed that they would be. Mike described the process used to develop forecasts in the Pre-Project Development Study and how the process used for the current phase of work, called the STOPS model, is different. This first pass at understanding ridership at this early stage is to give us an idea of the differences between the previous model and STOPS, and also incorporates the most current demographic information for the corridor. This gives the team a starting point for optimizing alternatives, which will be the focus of the work moving forward. New ridership forecasts will be run once alternatives are optimized.

Mona Elabbady described the three alternatives evaluated in the STOPS model and noted the same assumptions from the Pre-Project Development Study were used for the new analysis. Ridership was reported for streetcar, dedicated bus rapid transit, and arterial bus rapid transit. Mona shared the results of the STOPS forecast, indicating a decline in ridership of 24 to 36 percent across all modes. Mona highlighted that forecasts indicate a higher proportion of trips would be taken by zero-car households and a greater number of new transit trips would occur as compared to the Pre-Project Development Study model. Mona noted that the number of new transit trips and trips made by zero-car household trips shows strong need for improved transit service in the corridor despite lower overall ridership expected. Mona summarized the differences between the Pre-Project Development Study and STOPS forecasts and explained why the STOPS ridership forecasts are lower – changes in population and employment projections, general decline in overall transit ridership, and nuances associated with using STOPS vs. the previous regional model.

Councilmember Noecker asked about the differences between dedicated BRT and streetcar. Mona said BRT is slightly faster which positively impacts ridership. The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) sees the forecasts as very similar. Mona stated that the forecasts help to illustrate differences between the modes. Councilmember Noecker said she wants to be clear about the benefits of each. Councilmember Noecker noted that streetcar is more expensive and takes longer than BRT and the time spent developing streetcar is time that transit and streetscape improvements could be implemented more quickly on West 7<sup>th</sup> Street. Councilmember Noecker asked if BRT and streetcar are being studied at the same time. Mona confirmed that they are. Bridget Rief asked if project team members were surprised that ridership forecasts declined by 30 percent using the new model. Mona said that it was not a surprise to modeling staff given what they see on other projects across the country, but that project staff have been working to understand the reasons for differences.

Mona introduced FTA's Capital Investment Grants program and explained the project rating framework. Mona said that project staff conducted an evaluation to find out how the new ridership forecasts impact estimated ratings, gave an overview of the six project justification criteria and shared the estimated ratings. Even with lower ridership, streetcar still has an estimated medium rating, which qualifies the project for federal funding. Mona noted that the estimated ratings would be updated during the environmental and pre-engineering phase as design work advances.

## 5. Refinement of Locally Preferred Alternative

### Airport/Bloomington

Jessica Laabs provided an update on the Airport/Bloomington Issue Resolution Team (IRT). Jessica noted that key topics for the IRT are interlining the Riverview Corridor Project with the METRO Blue Line at MSP Airport, traffic and intersection operations, and the connection to the Mall of America. Jessica said that as the IRT discussed these items, a key issue that emerged is operations at the intersection of 24<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Killebrew Drive/Old Shakopee Road. There are significant traffic delays caused by the gate arms for the light rail crossing. Project staff conducted scenario evaluations to determine how long gates would be down during the peak hour and found they would be down for over half of the hour, which City of Bloomington and IRT members found unacceptable.

Grant Wyffels described the process used to evaluate potential new crossing locations and configurations that would serve both the Riverview Corridor Project and the METRO Blue Line. Grant described the two configurations that performed best in this evaluation: Option 1 and Option 8, which would both serve Riverview and Blue Line on 82<sup>nd</sup> Street.

In Option 1, the METRO Blue Line travels on the existing route to serve the 28<sup>th</sup> Avenue station. Instead of continuing south along 28<sup>th</sup> Avenue from the station, the route would turn west to travel along 82<sup>nd</sup> Street and serve a new at-grade station near the intersection of 82<sup>nd</sup> Street and 28<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Option 1 has a nested platform configuration with a longer platform to serve METRO Blue Line trains and a shorter one to serve Riverview vehicles. At the west end of the station, there would be stairs and an elevator to provide access over 24<sup>th</sup> Avenue to the Mall of America Transit Station. A drawback of this option is that transit riders would have to go upstairs, across 24<sup>th</sup> Avenue and back downstairs to get between the platforms and the Mall of America Transit Station.

Option 8 runs on the same 82<sup>nd</sup> Street alignment as Option 1 but includes an elevated station. Riverview and METRO Blue Line platforms would be located side by side. Option 8 is closer to the Mall of America Transit station and only requires riders to go up or downstairs once to connect between the two stations. This option could also include a skyway connection to future development to further enhance accessibility. Bridget asked if 28<sup>th</sup> Avenue and 82<sup>nd</sup> Street would experience the same gate down time issues as 24<sup>th</sup> Avenue. Grant said that the crossing at 28<sup>th</sup> Avenue has not been raised as a concern because there are fewer gates, lower travel speeds and traffic volumes, and a different intersection configuration. Bloomington Mayor Tim Busse emphasized that traffic volumes on 28<sup>th</sup> Avenue are much lower than on 24<sup>th</sup> Avenue and noted that another major factor is that the 24<sup>th</sup> Avenue/Killebrew Drive intersection presents a

major barrier for fire truck access, while alternative routes are available around the 28<sup>th</sup> Avenue intersection.

Mayor Busse noted that the Mall of America Transit Station recently underwent major renovations and asked whether changes to the METRO Blue Line and Riverview Corridor would require additional changes at the transit station. Jessica said that project staff have raised this question with FTA and it is not currently an area of concern because of the cost tradeoff of making this change, but the discussion would continue in greater detail with FTA. Jessica added that project staff are discussing transit operations and factors such as user experience, walking distances and travel times with Metro Transit. Jessica shared that increasing the distance riders have to walk is a concern for Metro Transit and other project partners and there is ongoing conversation on this topic. Mayor Busse thanked project staff and partners for their efforts and shared that the area south of the proposed station would be used for the Expo 2027/World's Fair if Minnesota is selected as the location for this event, noting that it would be good to make sure the area is accessible at that time.

Grant noted that the IRT spent time discussing the 34<sup>th</sup> Avenue/I-494 interchange and the 34<sup>th</sup> Avenue/American Boulevard intersection to make sure Riverview is compatible with future redevelopment. Jessica provided an overview of the next steps for the Bloomington/Airport IRT, including documenting status of issues in a memo the IRT is currently reviewing. This IRT will be taking a break until early 2022.

## **Bdote/Fort Snelling**

Jessica described key topics addressed by the Bdote/Snelling IRT and shared that input from stakeholders including tribal partners has led to a conclusion that the existing tunnel should not be widened. Jessica provided overview of key findings that led to the preference for using the existing tunnel, including the avoidance of additional disturbance to natural and cultural landscapes.

Grant shared that four potential tunnel alignments were explored and two have been identified for further analysis: a mixed traffic alternative and a single-track alternative. Grant stated that alignments that widened or replaced the existing tunnel were not advanced in the analysis. Under the mixed traffic alternative, the Riverview Corridor Project would cross the river sharing lanes with vehicle traffic and would travel through existing tunnel using the outside lanes with the current lane geometry. Grant noted that this alternative would likely require a gate that would stop traffic in both directions to allow eastbound transit vehicles to enter into traffic. This would also require reducing the design speed on Highway 5 from 50 miles per hour to 35 miles per hour by narrowing lanes and shoulders and using other measures.

Under the single-track alternative, the project would operate in a dedicated lane, but only one transit vehicle could travel through the Highway 5 tunnel at a time. Metro Transit has expressed concern about delays resulting from single-track operations. An initial analysis by the project team indicates that trains can be scheduled to minimize or eliminate any train conflicts or delays at this location. The single-track alternative would require narrowing lanes and reducing speeds in the tunnel from 50 to 45 miles per hour. Project staff are meeting with representatives from

the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT) and Metro Transit to work through questions regarding safety, speed reduction, operations and other related topics.

Jessica provided an overview of next steps for the Bdote/Snelling IRT. Bridget thanked project staff for their efforts and noted that there are serious benefits and disadvantages to consider for bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure, airport connections and transit operations. Tyler Blackmon said he shares Metro Transit's concerns about potential delays at this location and asked to confirm that the single-track alternative would not operate in mixed traffic throughout the segment. Grant confirmed that this is the case and said the project could probably operate at greater speeds than adjacent roadway. Grant said some sort of barrier could be implemented, which could provide operational advantages for MnDOT and Metro Transit. Tyler asked how the mixed traffic operations would affect the project rating. Jessica said mixed traffic operations may affect travel time. Mona agreed and said that travel time differences would be reflected in ridership forecasts, but because of the unique circumstances at this location, it is unlikely to cause concern for FTA.

Councilmember Kris Fredson shared his appreciation for the efforts to move forward with the Locally Preferred Alternative (LPA) of streetcar and make sure the project is done well. He noted there are challenges with both the single-track and mixed traffic alternatives and said it was surprising that traffic would be stopped on Highway 5 to accommodate trains. He also expressed concerns about the single-track operations and asked why a flyover is not under consideration. Councilmember Fredson stated he understands being mindful of cultural resource concerns of tribes and other stakeholders and said he does not believe there are technical constraints that would preclude a flyover. Jessica confirmed that impacts to natural and cultural resources are the main reason a flyover is not being considered and noted that options are limited by the need to connect to the existing tunnel. Jessica affirmed these two options are the best alignments under the circumstances and added that visual impacts are an area of concern for the National Park Service/Mississippi National River and Recreation Area (MNRRA). Jessica offered to bring additional information about a flyover option to the next Policy Advisory Committee meeting. Grant asked if this option would include the project running above Highway 5 and moving back to grade crossing Historic Fort Snelling and Building 17. Councilmember Fredson expressed support for a flyover option and asked if concerns about cultural and natural resource impacts should prevent consideration of a flyover option. He wants to know that all options for building the optimal project have been exhausted, especially given the operational concerns and impacts to Highway 5 under the mixed traffic or single-track options. He requested more information and in-depth discussion about a flyover option before it is eliminated from consideration.

Councilmember Noecker expressed concerns that adding gates and a new speed limit sign would not change behavior enough to safely implement a 35 mile per hour speed limit and fully stop traffic to facilitate project operations. Councilmember Noecker said the two options seemed to be presented as equally viable though the single-track alternative did not seem to have disadvantages compared to mixed traffic and asked for more details about the single-track drawbacks. Grant confirmed that impacts would be far lower for single-track than mixed traffic as the traffic signal and speed limit would not be needed, though single-track would still require some reconstruction of Highway 5. Grant said that project staff are scheduled to meet with

MnDOT and Metro Transit in early November to further discuss impacts to traffic and transit operations for each alternative.

Councilmember Noecker said that as a policymaker she is interested in the best option for transit and is not concerned with the best option for traffic and that the impacts to transit operations would not be substantial under the single-track alternative. Grant said that the advantages and drawbacks for the two alternatives have not been directly considered side-by-side, but that is the next step and will be discussed with Metro Transit and MnDOT. Jessica added that the team is seeking this kind of input and that the feedback provided through the meeting would be helpful for project staff to consider.

Chair Ortega asked if the issues related to impacts and feasibility of a flyover would be discussed. Jessica said project staff would present river crossing options and tradeoffs in greater detail to the Policy Advisory Committee at a future meeting.

Jessica said that project staff would continue meeting with the Bdote/Fort Snelling IRT on a monthly basis and that Saint Paul IRTs would reconvene in the coming months to refine streetcar and bus alternatives.

## **6. Community Engagement Updates**

Kevin Gallatin, Community Advisory Committee Co-Chair, provided an update on the first two Community Advisory Committee meetings. Kevin shared that he and Amanda Willis were elected co-chairs of the committee at the most recent meeting. Kevin noted that slowing traffic on Highway 5 could provide benefits to the community by shifting traffic to Shepard Road, which is already a goal. Kevin said committee members are excited to be involved in the project and think about how it will affect the community.

Lyssa Washington described ongoing public engagement efforts including online interactive maps that are being used by the Station Area Planning Working Group to identify important places and other areas of interest. Lyssa said there is a separate interactive map used to identify cultural resources and noted that project staff are looking for ways to further promote it. Lyssa provided an overview of recent, upcoming and future engagement opportunities.

## **7. Public Comment**

### **Joe Landsberger**

Joe noted that the discussion of the river crossing did not address the on ramps and asked how these would factor into the tunnel conversation. Joe also referred to Councilmember Noecker's concerns regarding rapid bus and asked how this option could be discussed without a cost-benefit analysis or comparison of costs between the two options. Joe noted that the West 7<sup>th</sup> Street area has seven designated historic properties and two historic districts and said that would be a good starting point for the cultural resources evaluation. (Staff provided a response to Mr. Landsberger on November 9, 2021)

## **Jay Severance**

Given issues with using the existing tunnel, believes it would be appropriate to revisit the possibility of doing a flyover from the CP spur terminus at the Highland Bridge development to 54<sup>th</sup> Street station across the river.

## **Greg Struve**

LPA ridership forecasts decreased by 30 percent and the resulting cost benefit was conducted under the assumption that costs have not decreased. A cost-benefit analysis should be one of the major components of an environmental review. Believes BRT would have a better cost-benefit analysis and would improve the project's opportunity for federal funding.

## **James Schoettler**

James believes the river crossing would have problems similar to the Killebrew Drive/24<sup>th</sup> Avenue intersection but of a far greater magnitude. Alternatives must be both feasible and prudent. James suggested there is a superior alternative for the river crossing that eliminates the problems discussed during this meeting: one that travels along the CP spur from Highland Bridge to 54<sup>th</sup> Street and Hiawatha Avenue and then connects to the METRO Blue Line. James urged Policy Advisory Committee members to insist on evaluation of this alternative

## **8. Next Meeting**

Date TBD.