

MINUTES

CITY COUNCIL MEETING CALLED TO ORDER

Mayor Blonigan called the meeting to order at 7:00 p.m.

ROLL CALL

Present: Murphy, Greenberg, Parisian, Wagner, Blonigan

Absent:

Staff: Tim Sandvik, City Manager; Chase Peterson-Etem, City Clerk; Heather Rand, Community Development Director; Richard McCoy, Public Works Director/City Engineer

PRESENTATION

The Council agreed to move Presentation A to the beginning of the meeting.

A. Growth Through Opportunity - Empower Inclusion

The Council thanked Terrance for his work with the various city departments and wished him well on future endeavors. Terrance thanked the Council for his time with the city.

OPPORTUNITY FOR THE PUBLIC TO ADDRESS THE CITY COUNCIL ON MATTERS NOT ON THE AGENDA

Paul and Gina Zalazar, 3104 Grimes Ave. N., noted a letter they received regarding a rental license fine and stated this is the first time they have been communicated with from the city. Sandvik stated someone from the Community Development department would be in contact with them to help.

APPROVAL OF THE OCTOBER 1, 2024 MEETING AGENDA

Peterson-Etem noted the addition of two items for tonight. First being the Voucher Disbursement Report for Other Business Item A and the second is adding Presentation Item D, a proclamation for recognizing Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

Member Murphy MOVED, seconded by Parisian to approve the October 1, 2024, meeting agenda. The vote was unanimous and the motion passed.

CONSENT AGENDA

Member Murphy MOVED, seconded by Parisian to approve the Consent Agenda. The vote was unanimous and the motion passed.

- A. Approve City Council Meeting minutes from July 16, 2024
- B. Receive Park, Recreation, and Forestry Commission minutes from August 27, 2024
- C. Approval of Licenses
- D. Resolution appointing Election Judges for the 2024 General Election
- E. Authorize Installation of an 8-foot-high Fence Around Police & Fire Vehicle Parking Lot at 4101 Hubbard

- F. Joint Powers Agreement for the Establishment and Continued Operation of the Bassett Creek Watershed Management Commission
- G. Robbinsdale Area Schools - School Resource Officer Contract

PRESENTATIONS

B. Representative Omar

Representative Omar thanked the Council for having her. She provided updates on the work she has been doing both in the region and specifically for Robbinsdale. She noted her office is there for residents and they can certainly reach out to her team if they need help. She also acknowledged and thanked Mayor Blonigan for his time on the Robbinsdale City Council and noted she submitted a recognition of his service in the Congressional Record where it will live in the Library of Congress. Sandvik read the letter aloud.

Mayor Blonigan thanked Representative Omar and reiterated the efforts they have made together.

C. Dr. Teri Staloch - Robbinsdale Area Schools Superintendent

Dr. Teri Staloch, Robbinsdale Area Schools Superintendent, thanked the Council for having her and noted she was there tonight to introduce herself and her vision for the School District. She provided information on the current status of the school district, including enrollment, staff, and their strategic plan. She mentioned their budget outlook and needs, and noted there is a question on the ballot for the General Election related to the school district budget. She thanked the Council for their time.

Member Wagner noted his support for the levy initiative on the ballot and asked what her approach is for the school board. Dr. Staloch noted the board's support for her and that she is also there to support them in creating the best policies possible and reaching the district's goals.

Member Murphy invited Dr. Staloch to return more than once a year, noting it could be beneficial in updating the public on the budgeting process and the importance of their budget considerations.

Member Greenberg asked if there were any areas she noticed that need improvement, or conversely, any areas that were performing better than expected. Dr. Staloch stated she is impressed with the commitment of the staff, but noted the academic outcomes are not where they need to be. She also noted that every student needs to feel that they belong and are supported for who they are.

Mayor Blonigan noted his support of Dr. Staloch and mentioned his experience with his children being part of the school district. He also mentioned the Seven Dreams Education Foundation and encouraged people to donate.

Member Parisian thanked Dr. Staloch and stated she graduated from Robbinsdale Area Schools. She appreciated the history of the district and where it's going in the future.

D. Proclamation declaring Domestic Violence Awareness Month.

Mayor Blonigan summarized the proclamation.

Member Parisian MOVED, seconded by Murphy to declare October as Domestic Violence Awareness Month in the City of Robbinsdale. The vote was unanimous and the motion passed.

PUBLIC HEARINGS

A. On-Sale Wine License w/ Sunday Sales for Taqueria El Parian

Sandvik introduced the item, noting that a public hearing is required, and the applicant is in attendance. He stated there are conditions that need to be met before they can be fully licensed, but staff does not see any issue with the applicant meeting these.

The applicant noted they are working on completing the items listed, but things have been moving slower than planned.

Mayor Blonigan opened the public hearing.

No one spoke during the public hearing.

Member Murphy MOVED, seconded by Wagner to close the public hearing. The vote was unanimous and the motion passed.

Mayor Blonigan asked if the applicant wanted to share any other information. The applicant noted some menu items and said that they will train staff properly for alcohol services.

Member Greenberg MOVED, seconded by Wagner to approve the issuance of the On-Sale Wine License w/ Sunday Sales, and a restaurant license, to Taqueria El Parian, LLC, dba Taqueria El Parian. The vote was unanimous and the motion passed.

OLD BUSINESS

A. Consider Municipal Consent for Blue Line Extension Light Rail

Sandvik introduced the item noting the Council has been discussing this for months and have hosted an open house and public hearing, among other methods, to gather feedback from the community. He noted the Council tabled this item at their last meeting, as additional information had been provided from the project office. He noted the Council's options for the vote and that there are two resolutions drafted. One for denial and one for approval of Municipal Consent. He stated a decision has to be made by October 10, and staff is asking the Council to make that decision tonight.

Member Greenberg asked about altering the resolutions. Sandvik recommended staying as close as possible to the draft resolutions as they have been reviewed by the City Attorney and include specific items related to state statute. He also mentioned the additional information that was received is included in these drafts.

Member Murphy hopes the Council will vote no, with conditions. He stated they only get one opportunity to vote on this and voting no could provide Robbinsdale with a little more power with the project office, and to make them obligated to do what they are asking for. He stated Robbinsdale is the smallest city in this project and feels we are being left out of some conversations and voting no will provide more impact.

Member Parisian thanked everyone who attended the Work Session earlier and appreciates everyone's involvement. She noted she would be voting yes for Municipal Consent and read a statement as to why. She noted the concerns around safety, traffic impacts, and overall design elements, however, the additional information provided from the project office has provided commitments that address the majority of those concerns and the steps they would take to do so. She mentioned the positive and collaborative momentum that has been gained and that by granting Municipal Consent, Robbinsdale will be able to continue to influence the design and decisions being made. She reiterated that she will be voting to approve Municipal Consent, and will continue to advocate for safety, sustainability, and anti-displacement efforts.

Member Wagner noted his support for the project and read a prepared statement. That statement is attached to these minutes.

Member Greenberg noted all parties are on a path to get to yes, and that the additional information provided by the project office is really only the beginning of the conversation, not the end. He stated they could have provided this information months ago and he doesn't feel there has been enough discussion with the project office about their concerns. He stated voting no is the only way we can include conditions that they would have to consider, and he doesn't see that as a negative, just the next step of the project. Voting no doesn't mean he doesn't support the project but will provide additional time and conversations to address his concerns.

Member Murphy stated he feels voting no will allow Robbinsdale a better opportunity to influence the project office to address their concerns and agrees with Member Greenberg, that voting no is just part of the process.

Member Greenberg reiterated he doesn't feel they have had enough time with the new information that was presented by the project office, and although it has helped answer many questions, he still has more.

Member Wagner stated he doesn't feel voting to deny Municipal Consent will offer any different outcome and the project office has made efforts to be in line with Robbinsdale.

Member Murphy noted the project office would be obligated to address their concerns if they vote no with conditions and wants to make sure our needs are being met too.

Mayor Blonigan stated that up until last week, he wouldn't have considered anything other than a no vote with conditions. However, he noted the additional information the project office provided and felt they had listened to the Council. He listed the items they addressed in their letter. He stated Robbinsdale has gotten the project office to agree on several items and noted a large concern has been safety, and emergency vehicles being able to get where they need to be. He mentioned the project office is against elevating the track but has addressed concerns around emergency vehicle and pedestrian safety. He feels the negotiations have reached a point where they would end up and asked himself if he trusts that these new items will actually be incorporated into the project. Blonigan mentioned ridership and quoted Irene Fernando, Hennepin County Commissioner Chair. The quote notes that ridership is more than the number of people riding, but who we are serving, and this is an equity investment in communities of color, that have historically been underinvested in, and light rail can provide primum transportation to communities of color, who rely on transit every day. Blonigan noted it's estimated that over 50% of the riders in this corridor will not have a car in their household. He feels that many of the people opposed to the project are homeowners and feels there hasn't been enough representation for the 50% of people who rent in Robbinsdale. He noted he does trust that the project office will uphold their commitments.

Member Greenberg stated Mayor Blonigan's points are valid, but even if we vote no right now, we are still heading towards consent in the future.

Mayor Blonigan asked if being the first city in history to vote no is a negative thing, and if that would truly get us more. Member Greenberg stated voting no isn't about stopping the project, it's about getting to yes.

Member Murphy agreed with Member Greenberg that voting no would allow us to get more questions answered and wouldn't be negative.

Member Wagner noted that in the past he thought we could draft a resolution of support with conditions, but even though that is not the case anymore, he doesn't feel the outcome will be different if they deny Municipal Consent. He noted the project office has been collaborative to get to this point and he supports the project.

Member Greenberg reiterated this is only the start of the conversations and that he just wants the best for Robbinsdale.

Mayor Blonigan noted he feels like they got a lot from the project office with the most recent information and doesn't want to continue to delay it as that will only increase costs. He noted this is also about relationship building and he wants to continue to have positive relationships in the future. Member Murphy noted he doesn't feel there would be any negative impacts on future relationships if they denied Municipal Consent.

Member Wagner MOVED, seconded by Parisian to approve Resolution No. 8118 "A RESOLUTION PROVIDING MUNICIPAL CONSENT FOR THE BLUE LINE LIGHT RAIL EXTENSION."

Mayor Blonigan asked about adding in language that someone would look into the possibility of changing the law, to allow firefighters the use of emitter devices in their personal vehicles to obtain signal light priority to get to the fire station. He noted the Hennepin County Commissioners agreed to look into this, not the project office. Sandvik noted he could look into this but isn't sure the project office could commit. He noted this is unique to Robbinsdale as we have paid-on-call firefighting crew. Dan Soler, Hennepin County, noted this is a resolution to the Metropolitan Council, not the county, and stated the Council could create a separate resolution to the county related to this. Sandvik noted they could discuss this in a future Work Session, as well as include it in legislative priorities.

Member Greenberg asked about each firefighter having an emergency vehicle which they could use when they are on call. Sandvik noted he doesn't feel that ask would be included as part of 30% design.

A roll call was taken.

Ayes: Parisian, Wagner, Blonigan

Nays: Murphy, Greenberg

The motion passed 3-2.

NEW BUSINESS

A. None.

OTHER BUSINESS

A. Voucher Requests Pending Approval for Disbursement

Member Murphy MOVED, seconded by Greenberg to approve the Voucher Requests Pending Approval for Disbursement. The vote was unanimous and the motion passed.

ADMINISTRATIVE REPORTS

Sandvik thanked everyone who attended the Shred-It event last weekend and noted the upcoming Boo Bash happening this weekend at Sanborn Park from 5 to 7 p.m. He also noted the tree sale is happening now, and they can deliver to people's houses.

Peterson-Etem noted that early voting is happening at City Hall and additional hours are available the two weekends prior to election day. He noted information related to these hours and other election questions can be found on the city website.

COUNCIL GENERAL COMMUNICATIONS

Member Greenberg thanked everyone for their involvement and that this is only the beginning of conversations related to the Blue Line Extension project.

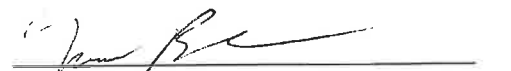
Member Wagner agreed with Member Greenberg and encouraged folks to stay engaged. He thanked the Council for their work and thoughtful discussion.

Mayor Blonigan noted the collaboration between the Council and is happy they each had input into the Blue Line Extension project.

ADJOURNMENT

Member Parisian MOVED, seconded by Greenberg to adjourn the meeting at 9:24 p.m. The vote was unanimous and the motion passed.


Chase Peterson-Etem, City Clerk


Raymond Blackledge, Mayor Pro Tem

Introduction

In 2016 the City of Robbinsdale took a vote on the preliminary design plans for the Blue Line Light Rail Extension.¹ The resolution included concerns about traffic flow, pedestrian safety, policing, park and ride spaces, and a number of other things. Not dissimilar to the resolutions we are asked to vote on tonight. Indeed, that resolution **granted** municipal consent. There was an understanding that while elements of the project still needed to be flushed out, the City was eager to welcome an investment of this scale. A sense of collaboration with the County and Metropolitan Council was present throughout the resolution. It passed unanimously.

Since then the project has changed, as most projects do. The use of the freight rail corridor is no longer on the table. Thanks to BNSF, it probably never was. That isn't the fault of the City, the County, or the Metropolitan Council. Often I have felt that this council has been too skeptical towards those other government bodies. We all represent Robbinsdale in some form or another. Technically, the Mayor represents me as he is elected city-wide. I believe he has the best interests of the city in mind and I don't think it is too out of line to extend that same courtesy to our representatives at the County and Metropolitan Council. I don't want to discount their vision of what they think would be beneficial. Considering that both bodies, as of late, have been responsive and have directly addressed many of our concerns, I hope our skepticism has lessened enough to provide consent.

Some have pointed out that this "municipal consent" vote has turned into a yes/no on whether or not a city (or an individual council member) supports light rail transit. I agree with that analysis. But instead of backing away from this framing, I am going to lean into it. Out of all the concerns in the draft deny resolution, the only item the project team hasn't moved on is the proposal to elevate the route over County Road 9. They have reviewed our request and have made it clear that they do not agree with us. I do not believe a review process triggered by a "Deny" vote will result in any change to this. Now, the only thing this vote is about is whether or not we approve of the *only actually existing plan* to bring light rail to Robbinsdale.

I do support this plan and I will tell you why.

Why I Support the Blue Line Extension

It is no secret that we are deep in the midst of a climate crisis. Those are not just my words. Robbinsdale declared a climate emergency back at the beginning of 2022.² A problem of this magnitude calls for bold action - not more of the same. The Blue Line Extension is a near-term solution to address one of the greatest causes of global warming emissions: passenger vehicles. We need fewer drivers and more people using all-electric options like light

¹ Robbinsdale, Minnesota, Resolution 7475

² <https://ccxmedia.org/news/robbinsdale-golden-valley-declare-climate-emergency/>

rail. Once we are able to significantly lower our emissions, we should not be willing to go back to how things were. That is why any solution must be permanent. An investment as large as this proposed project guarantees a certain level of longevity, which is a good thing.

There are some concerns about the immediate environmental impact of this project. Namely around its construction. The Robbinsdale portion of County Road 81 is already a busy thoroughfare, so adding tracks where asphalt and concrete already are will not greatly alter the existing ecosystem. In Robbinsdale and Crystal, the noise levels of the extension when it is operational will likely not be any louder than the vehicles traveling 45-55 mph on the county road it will be built on. Train signal and station noises can likely be adjusted as needed.

One of the most important things we as a city, state, and country can do to address climate change is to encourage people to drive less. With our sprawling metropolitan area we need to have alternative modes of green transportation, like an electric train, so everyone can go where they need.

A healthy environment is good for Robbinsdale, and so is a strong metro-wide economy. This extension will provide an affordable way for our neighbors in other cities to enjoy the many wonderful things Robbinsdale has to offer. Our great parks, trails, lakes, businesses and restaurants need to be experienced by all. At the same time, our fantastic residents will have more transportation flexibility, so they can share their money and talent in each metro community they care about.

The proposed extension offers a one-seat ride from Brooklyn Park all the way to the airport and Mall of America. Taking a bus on a similar route will require at least one transfer, increasing the travel time. While I support all forms of bus transit, I think that the travel times for most destinations will be faster on light rail. Ironically, this project could actually result in more buses. All of the proposed stations will make great starting points for new east/west bus routes.

Our city budget is heavily dependent on homeowners to pay for critical services. Expanding our corporate tax base is essential for the long term health of Robbinsdale's finances. Development opportunities along the route will bring new and exciting businesses for Birdtowners and others to patronize. Their success is tied to ours.

Robbinsdale already punches above its weight and this project will turn it into a heavyweight champion. We are the only ones on the extension with an "authentic human scale downtown". For many people who choose to ride the light rail that will be a big draw. Afterall, it will only be a short walk away from a station and park-and-ride. I envision a Robbinsdale that is a metropolitan hub and a gateway to the rest of the northwest suburbs. Now is the time to help bring that vision into reality.

Of course this project is not intended for the sole benefit of the private sector. Wealth inequality has been a chronic problem plaguing communities since our country's founding. The working class has been fighting for their share for a long time. I see this project as a way for the

wealth generated by our labor to remain here. Each city along the corridor is filled with working class neighborhoods. How often do these types of communities get \$3 billion directed towards them? Most of the time projects with large price tags are for private investment opportunities with only the corporate owners set to benefit. For once it is our turn to be invested in.

Thankfully, this extension is for the entire public. Anyone will be able to ride it regardless of income, credit score, ability to drive, or any other demographic measurement. Not being “good enough” in one of those measurements could prevent someone from getting a car. That is a huge limit to their freedom in our society. A big reason I’m so enthusiastic about this project is because it objectively increases the liberty of every person on the route.

All of us up here swore an oath to uphold the Constitution of the United States. In the preamble it says (this is a partial quote) “We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union . . . [will] promote the general Welfare and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity (future generations)”. I believe that this project does both of those things.

Deny Downsides

Many of our discussions around municipal consent gave the impression that there were no downsides to a “Deny” vote. Nothing would be lost and only leverage was to be gained. To be honest, I fell into this way of thinking too, but after reflection I see that there are tangible drawbacks to “Deny”.

If the City Council votes to deny municipal consent, it triggers a hearing facilitated by the Metropolitan Council. Before the hearing, an independent investigation might take place. After the hearing the Metropolitan Council has 60 days to respond.³ To put it bluntly, there could easily be months of delay if consent is denied.

For each month delayed, the metro area could add up to 460 tons of CO2 that would have otherwise been prevented, per the project team's estimates.⁴ According to the EPA's emissions calculator that is the same amount of carbon produced by over 1 million gas-powered vehicle miles and it would take 7600 trees ten years to recapture it.⁵

³ <https://www.revisor.mn.gov/statutes/cite/473.3994>

⁴

https://metro council.org/Transportation/Projects/Light-Rail-Projects/METRO-Blue-Line-Extension/Publications-And-Resources/Environmental/SDEIS/BLE_SDEIS_Chapter-5-Physical-and-Environmental-Ana.aspx#page=75

⁵ <https://www.epa.gov/energy/greenhouse-gas-equivalencies-calculator>

Additionally, \$160 million has already been spent on this project over the last 10 years.⁶ That is roughly \$1,330,000 a month. Construction costs for any project, public or private, continue to increase. The earlier the construction starts the cheaper it will be. Each month the project is delayed has real costs associated with it.

The public perception of a “Deny” is an important consideration and one that I don’t think we’ve spent enough time talking about. I believe that for most people municipal consent is seen simply as a pro-transit or anti-transit vote. Some people want us to think it is more nuanced than that, but does that matter? When a Robbinsdale resident hears the news that we voted “against the proposed Blue Line Extension” (afterall, the project plan ~~is~~ the project), how are they going to feel? I’d feel like my city is openly against public transit investments. I think the County, Met Council, State Legislators, and even the Federal Government will feel that way too.

The intergovernmental relationship impacts should not be taken for granted. During an election, who is going to be more influential to you? A person that says “I’m not voting for you, but here’s what I need you to do”, or someone that goes “I’m happy to support, here are my important issues...”? Certainly a representative needs to take both into consideration, but which is going to have more of an impact and who would you be more willing to collaborate with? We risk cooling our relationship with the County and Metropolitan Council which will make it harder to advance city interests with those bodies in the future.

For example, I work in IT and whenever a coworker gets frustrated with a computer problem, I remind them that both of us have the same goal: to get their computer working. Combativeness and impatience with me will not help the resolution come quicker. In fact, most times it creates delays as I have to spend time assuaging fears or over-explain what I need to do to get their computer working. Conversely, if I do not do a good job communicating then I might not solve the underlying issue which could cause even more frustration in the future. If both of us face the problem with a constructive attitude everyone is better off.

Even the project office has expressed gratitude for our collaboration so far. There is a definite desire there to continue improving it on both sides. I thank the City Staff for their effort on that front as our team’s responsiveness has clearly had an impact. I don’t want to put that in jeopardy. That is why I disagree with the framing that we will “lose leverage” if we approve municipal consent. We do, however, run the risk of weakening ourselves if we deny consent.

As a union member I know that there needs to be good-faith negotiations on both sides to reach a good collective bargaining agreement. This is no different. Our strength lies in our ability to push back when necessary, but also in our willingness to compromise. City Staff effectively represented our concerns, and the project team has demonstrated a willingness to meet us halfway. In my mind the negotiations for this phase have been settled. We have used up whatever perceived leverage the vote would entitle us. It is unwise to believe that a “Deny”

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<https://www.startribune.com/cost-of-blue-line-extension-could-exceed-the-southwest-light-rail/600346957>

vote would extend negotiations. To achieve the best outcome for Robbinsdale, we must be prepared to give as well as take.

Regarding the Memos

In an August 29th letter to the City, the Blue Line project team fully laid out their position regarding our request to elevate any potential tracks over County Road 9 (42nd Avenue) . They identified that our primary motivations for the request were emergency vehicle response times, pedestrian safety, and impacts to adjacent commercial property. I will highlight some direct quotes from that letter plus three more letters from September 4th, 13th, and 25th. Afterwards I will share my thoughts about them.

Regarding emergency vehicle response times they say:

“Vehicles using these cross streets today encounter a red light about 73% of the time, with at-grade light rail, they would encounter a red light slightly less, at 71% of the time. In addition, intersection signalization can be refined once the light rail is operational to ensure the intersections continue to operate optimally for response times, safety, and traffic flow.

Emergency vehicles will continue to have signal priority and pre-emption as they do today, meaning light rail trains will not impact emergency response times for first responders driving official emergency vehicles.”

Regarding the impacts of elevating tracks on adjacent properties:

“An elevated light rail bridge design does not avoid . . . property impacts, and actually requires additional property acquisition to accommodate the large support piers. In particular, the large retaining wall supported ramp segments of the bridge needed at either end requires more width, resulting in a full residential property acquisition at Twin Oak Drive and Lakeland Avenue North and additional strip takings. In addition to additional land acquisition, there are also impacts to access associated with an elevated light rail bridge design. Of note, the current at-grade design allows a left turn lane to be incorporated for southbound access to the Twin Lakes boat launch. This access point has been specifically noted by city staff as an important connection to maintain. With an elevated section, the required retaining wall would prevent this left turn from being accommodated, and access to the Twin Lakes boat launch would be more circuitous.”

Their response about pedestrian safety:

"While drivers can be unpredictable, trains are driven by professional operators and remain on fixed track. Trains are easily noticed and anticipated by pedestrians, bicycles, and drivers. The current at-grade design proposal allows for a safer and more welcoming pedestrian experience, including:

- Shorter crossing distance than is possible with a bridge due to the placement of bridge piers
- High-visibility pedestrian and bicycle crossings
- Connections to the regional trail
- Lane width reductions
- Additional pedestrian refuge areas
- Landscaping
- Pedestrian scale street lighting"

"At-grade light rail allows for better sightlines for drivers and pedestrians to see each other. Bridge structures, such as large concrete piers, obstruct sightlines and cast shadows that can hide oncoming traffic and people walking, biking or rolling from each other. During certain times of day, large parts of the public realm, including crosswalks, sidewalks, and multiuse paths would be in the shadow of the bridge. In general, at-grade light rail creates a more consistent pedestrian realm which allows people driving to see and expect to encounter people walking, biking, and rolling."

An additional letter was sent to the City from the project office on September 4th. This memo included some additional information on the park and ride station at the downtown Robbinsdale stop. Here are some key quotes:

"The proposed design includes:

- Approximately 290 parking spaces
- New transit center for bus and other transit service connections, freeing up the current Hubbard
- Transit Center site for future development
- Metro Transit police substation
- Remaining space on site for a US Bank branch and potential additional development

. . . The current 290-space park-and-ride proposal will be one of the smaller structured park-and-rides in terms of capacity in the METRO Transit system. Previous design iterations

included up to 500 parking spaces. In response to city concerns, the size of the park-and-ride was reduced to be more in line with Robbinsdale's community character and needs."

Further along they say:

"Relocating the Robbinsdale Transit Center from its current location at the Hubbard Marketplace to the new park-and-ride will consolidate transit operations within the city and create an exciting redevelopment opportunity of the existing site. Hennepin County and the Metropolitan Council will no longer need the property in this area for a transit use and will work to advance city visions for future use, ownership, and redevelopment of this key site."

On Friday, September 13th, the Extension's interim project director sent a letter that reinforced what the previous two memos laid out in addition to other commitments. Again, I will highlight some of its contents.

"City input and partnership will be integral in this collaborative future design process. We are deeply committed to working hand-in-hand with the city through these future design phases to ensure optimal safety solutions that meet our shared expectations for safety in Robbinsdale."

"Specific traffic control measures and an operational plan for the Lowry Avenue Station will be developed in partnership with North Memorial hospital, the cities of Robbinsdale and Minneapolis, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board, and Hennepin County through future design phases, but are not within the intended scope of Municipal Consent as they do not constitute a major design element."

"The project team will work with the City to identify and execute all necessary MOUs and agreements. All the specific agreements currently highlighted in the Robbinsdale draft resolution are consistent with similar agreements executed for other light rail projects in the region. We look forward to working with you on specific details of these agreements as the project advances."

"These steps for creation of the [safety] plans and training have just started but must all be complete before the LRT line is allowed to begin operation. We look forward to the City's law enforcement, public safety, and emergency management staff involvement in shaping and establishing these plans and protocols."

The most recent letter, from September 25th, includes the following commitments:

“The Projects also commit to relocating the Downtown Robbinsdale Station from its currently proposed location south of 40th Avenue to a new location north of 40th Avenue. These commitments will be reflected in 60% design plans.”

“While the final design for the Park-and-Ride and Transit Center is not complete, the Blue Line Extension Project commits that it will include no more than 290 parking spaces.”

“[Regarding North Memorial’s concerns] The Project can not commit to specific mitigation measures at this stage, as that must be formally done through the federal environmental process. At this stage all possible options to address North Memorial concerns are on the table.”

“The Blue Line Extension Project commits to designing and constructing station platforms to be able to accommodate the potential future addition of turnstiles or other barricade designs at a later date. These designs will be developed in collaboration with the city through the station design process in 2025.”

“The Blue Line Extension will develop, in partnership with local emergency response departments, a Safety and Security Management Plan before revenue service begins. This document will detail strategies for organizing, controlling, and influencing safety and security throughout the design, construction, procurement, testing, activation and acceptance of the Blue Line Extension.”

“Metro Transit has a standard practice of working closely with local emergency response offices in advance of revenue service and on a regular basis after service begins, including regular planning and safety drills. Metro Transit Police Department holds quarterly fire and life safety meetings with surrounding agencies within light rail transit corridors to discuss concerns and provide updates and resources. All Blue Line Extension cities will be added to this regular coordination.”

In my view the project office has adequately addressed the concerns we have relayed to them. They met us half-way on the downtown station location and placed it north of 40th Avenue. They lowered the number of proposed parking spaces to under 300 after our feedback.

With rider safety being a top concern of residents, they have also promised to include a Metro Transit PD substation at the park and ride facility. One of the big wish list items for the City was getting ownership of the Hubbard Marketplace building. They have now committed to helping us see that happen.

In the past I was a proponent of elevating the track over County Road 9 (42nd Ave), but after listening to the project office and hearing their concerns, I agree with them. The benefits we want to achieve and the problems we are trying to address will not be better accomplished by vaulting the train into the sky. Having tracks tower above pedestrians and vehicles will not create a welcoming atmosphere or aesthetic. By keeping the light rail at-grade throughout Robbinsdale, we can maintain the “authentic human scale downtown” feel by having an authentic human scale transit system.

I know there have been some concerns about ridership numbers surrounding the park and ride (and the project in general), but I do not share those. In 1998 the Pioneer Press interviewed project members of the then proposed Hiawatha Line. They were hoping that by 2020 ridership would be 24,000 people a day.⁷ It turns out they should’ve been more optimistic. At the start of 2020 ridership was just under 30,000 people a day.⁸ Those estimates were from over 25 years ago. Data science has only gotten better and members of the current project team have benefitted from the knowledge gained from the Hiawatha Line project. I trust their ridership projections.

A common theme throughout the interim project director’s letters was gratitude to the City for being an active and productive partner in the preliminary design process. Again, I want to thank City Staff for their tireless effort this entire time. And again, this is why I am concerned about the negative relationship and negotiation impacts a “Deny” vote will have.

Conclusion

Ultimately this vote comes down to one thing: whether to accept or decline the project team’s input. That informs all other considerations. If one thinks, as I do, that the project team’s analysis of our in-scope requests are correct, then it really leaves no room for a “Deny” vote from supporters of light rail transit. In this case the vote is whether or not the project should proceed in general.

If one does not agree with the project team’s analysis, then the calculation must be made on whether potential gains are worth the cost. As I mentioned earlier, those costs include intergovernmental negotiation impacts, anti-transit public perception, and the monetary and environmental side effects of project delay. If we “Deny”, I do not have confidence we can win

⁷ Stassen-Berger, Rachel E.. "TWIN CITIES LIGHT RAIL FEELS CLOSER TO REALITY//NEXT FEW MONTHS ARE KEY TO ANSWERING QUESTIONS." St. Paul Pioneer Press (MN), October 25, 1998: 1A. NewsBank: Access World News. <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.ezproxy.hclib.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AWNB&docref=news/0EB5E34136A888B9>.

⁸ <https://www.metrotransit.org/performance#blueline>

the outstanding in-scope changes through the Metropolitan Council hearing process. Our conditions in the "Deny" resolution are themselves going to be denied. I fear that a dissent vote could negatively impact any future negotiations, MOUs, or grants for things not related to the design, like anti-displacement. It is not worth the political and relationship capital it will cost.

This project has been decades in the making and I don't claim to have a more enlightened insight into civil engineering than the experts. That is the beauty of representative democracy though. A working class person such as myself is afforded the opportunity to weigh in on this. I am fortunate to have so many qualified people helping me make this decision. Many of the Blue Line staff have worked on this and other major transit projects for their whole careers. The same goes for our City's staff as well. We have some world class talent working on our behalf. I have the utmost respect for their opinion and I thank them for their diligence on this.

I am also fortunate to be part of a smart, considerate, and collaborative council. I appreciate all of our conversations and the insights you have given me. We have done a good job of making sure one another is heard. To me that shows that none of us take this responsibility lightly.

I also want to thank all of the Robbinsdale residents that have provided their input on the project. Please know that this discussion isn't over with this vote. It really is just the beginning and I want everyone to stay engaged regardless of the outcome.

As I have laid out, this is the ideal opportunity to voice our opinion on the project as a whole. I hope my colleagues who support the light rail extension - even with its imperfections - are able to see that as well. I hope they vote to approve municipal consent.