

April 6, 1984

Citizens League
84 S. 6th St., room 530
Minneapolis, Mn. 55402
338-0791

MEMORANDUM

TO: Legislators and others interested in light rail transit

FROM: Curt Johnson, executive director, Citizens League

SUBJECT: Citizens League statement

The Citizens League is asking the 1984 Legislature not to act on something as far-reaching as light rail transit by a "back door" approach. In our enclosed statement we state that an issue of such significance, involving the potential ultimate expenditure of hundreds of millions of dollars, should be debated on its own merits, instead of being included as a one-paragraph amendment to another bill.

Moreover, we believe a key component to the success of light rail, its ability to attract riders, has not yet been able to be demonstrated. In fact, recently-released data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census concerning employment locations in the metropolitan area makes light rail's ability to attract riders even more questionable.

We would appreciate any comments you might have on our statement. Thank you.

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CITIZENS LEAGUE
84 S. 6th St., Room 530
Minneapolis, MN 55402
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STATEMENT

TO: Members, Minnesota Legislature

SUBJECT: Financing of light rail transit

("No, no!" said the Queen. "Sentence
first -- verdict afterwards." Lewis
Carroll, Alice in Wonderland)

A proposal in the 1984 Minnesota Legislature would earmark approximately \$10 million in 1985 for planning and engineering for light rail transit in the Twin Cities metropolitan area.

The proposal is part of a bill that would accelerate transfer of the motor vehicle excise tax receipts from the state general revenue fund to the highway user tax distribution fund. Under the proposal, 25 percent of the amounts transferred would be dedicated for transit, with 80 percent of the 25 percent earmarked for the metropolitan area. The proposal also specifies that all of the funds available for transit in the metropolitan area under this act in 1985 would be given to the state commissioner of transportation exclusively for "planning and engineering for light rail transit."

The Legislature is not considering light rail transit on its merits--The Minnesota Legislature is considering such a fundamental decision about the future of transportation in the Twin Cities metropolitan area in an extremely unusual way. The Legislature is not taking up a specific bill concerning light rail transit, so that it could debate, up front, whether light rail should or should not be built, where it should go, what it would accomplish, and how it would be financed. Instead the issue is buried as a one-paragraph amendment to a bill designed to transfer the revenues from the excise tax on motor vehicles from the state general fund to the highway user tax distribution fund.

The proposal seems innocent enough, because the bill would dedicate revenues for only one year, 1985, and the funds could only be used for "the planning and engineering design for light rail transit". But such an action could set a precedent that such funds are to be available to light rail transit in coming years, assuming that light rail advocates are able to demonstrate that they need the money.

Major questions have not been answered--The "foot in the door" action in this session eventually could lead to commitments of hundreds of millions of dollars of expenditure for light rail transit. It would seem logical that light rail should already have demonstrated that it can

fulfill some transportation need in the metropolitan area. But such is not the case.

Light rail transit supporters frequently cite non-ridership benefits such as land development impact, reduction in use of petroleum fuel, and lower transit operating expenses than with buses. But irrespective of the alleged benefits in those areas (and we will indicate later our comments on them), the key to light rail transit's success is that it must attract riders.

What does it mean to attract riders? At a minimum it means that: (a) thousands of workers living relatively near the location of the light rail lines who (b) now drive their cars alone to work during the morning rush hour each day (c) in or very near the downtowns of Minneapolis or Saint Paul, (d) pay the full price of parking out of their own pockets, (e) leave their cars all day without using them in the course of their employment, and (f) then turn around and go back home during the afternoon rush hour will (g) find that light rail transit is sufficiently convenient and inexpensive so that they will leave their cars home and go by rail.

The facts available do not make it possible to determine whether those seven conditions exist anywhere in the Twin Cities metropolitan area. In fact, the information which is available casts serious doubt on the ability of light rail transit to attract enough riders who now are driving downtown alone. Persons often are surprised to learn the facts on the number of people who have jobs located outside the downtowns of Saint Paul and Minneapolis. The 1980 Census reveals, for example, that almost nine out of 10 workers who live in Ramsey or Hennepin Counties have work destinations other than downtown Saint Paul or Minneapolis. Of course, many of the persons who do come downtown to work already are taking the bus or carpooling. Thus, it does not seem as if very many additional persons would take light rail transit.

Most assuredly light rail would attract those bus riders whose bus routes would be eliminated by the light rail lines. But such action might do little more than increase the fare those riders must pay each day.

What these figures really demonstrate, however, is that a truly improved system of transit is needed to serve non-downtown destinations, something which few persons would argue cannot be accomplished satisfactorily by light rail transit, because non-downtown destinations are scattered in so many different places.

But even accepting that there still are large numbers of workers who drive downtown alone to work, park their cars all day at their own expense and then drive home at night, the logical question is how many of them happen to live close enough to the light rail transit lines for rail to be an attractive option. Is one-mile away close enough? Five miles away? Light rail advocates talk of feeder buses dropping people off at transit stops. This certainly is likely. But how many persons will choose that option, if it involves a substantial longer time riding the feeder bus instead of going directly to their destination?

It doesn't seem likely that in the light rail corridors--at least those under discussion--the proportion of workers whose jobs are located downtown would be any higher than the county's overall average. Thus as many as nine out of 10 persons living near the light rail line will have job destinations located other than where the light rail line goes.

Land development changes near light rail transit may not occur--Supporters of light rail transit argue that higher density residential development will be located near the light rail stops. Thus ridership will grow over time, even though it may be small to start with. If such a projection is to come true, it will be necessary for the cities through which light rail transit will pass to zone land for higher density purposes. At this point there is no guarantee that such zoning will be accomplished. In fact, neighborhood residents usually strongly resist higher density housing near their homes. Even if the zoning is changed, there is no assurance that development would occur as deemed desirable, and, if it did, there still is not assurance that the people who live in such developments would have jobs located where the light rail lines would go. The importance of the land use dimension to the success of light rail was highlighted in a paper presented in January 1984 to the Transportation Research Board in Washington, D. C., by Robert Cervero, assistant professor, Department of City and Regional Planning, Institute of Urban and Regional Development, University of California, Berkeley. Cervero's paper outlined light rail developments in the nation. He states: "Studies over the past decade have consistently shown that rail transit can have a significant effect on shaping urban form and land uses only if integrated with local pro-development policies."

Other claimed benefits of light rail transit are questionable--Some supporters of light rail transit argue that it represents good insurance for a metropolitan area against the prospect of there being a petroleum shortage. If this were to be possible, then light rail would have to be carrying a significant proportion of trips in the metropolitan area. This can't happen because the lines serve so few corridors. The combined length of the three corridors under study in the Twin Cities area now for light rail is about 25 miles, which is less than three percent of the total mileage of existing bus routes in the region.

If non-petroleum use of the public transit fleet is the real objective, existing buses could be converted to electric trolley buses. An earlier Citizens League study demonstrated that if the entire Twin Cities area bus fleet were electrified, the total petroleum savings in the region would be about 2.9 percent of all fuel used by cars and buses in the Twin Cities area now.

Another claim by light rail advocates is that use of light rail will reduce operating costs of the Twin Cities bus system. This argument is based on the point that one driver can carry many more passengers on eight rail transit than on a bus, because light rail vehicles can be attached to each other. This argument assumes, however, that there are corridors where full buses follow one after another in large numbers. This could be true on the University Ave. line during certain rush hour periods. But it is not commonly the case.

In fact, if light rail vehicles are to save personnel, because of carrying more persons per driver, then it is necessary that the frequency of service be reduced. That, in turn, could affect ridership negatively.

What really makes the personnel savings issue questionable, however, is the acknowledged need for feeder buses to serve the light rail lines.

The projected expense, and financing, of light rail is not yet known--At this moment, only the sketchiest information on possible capital expense is available. No one knows what proportion is likely to be forthcoming from the federal government nor how the local share, however large, will be paid for. The federal share may be far below the 75 percent which many light rail supporters expect. For example, Congressman Martin Sabo, a high-ranking member of the U.S. House Transportation Subcommittee said earlier this year that 50 percent federal share is more likely.

Summary--The 1984 Legislature does not need to rush through approval of light rail transit. At a minimum it should await the outcome of the current light rail study being conducted by the Metropolitan Council. A draft environmental impact statement is expected in November 1984. The Twin Cities metropolitan area has been engaging in a debate over rail transit for more than a decade. The Legislature ought to settle the issue in a session which has a light rail transit proposal front and center, with all the available facts on costs and ridership available. There are too many unanswered questions now. Moreover, a new transit planning structure is being seriously considered by the 1984 Legislature, which is designed to decide just those sorts of questions.

Some persons claim that the Legislature needs to act now or lose a funding opportunity from the federal Urban Mass Transit Administration (UMTA). That assumption is not true, according to an UMTA spokesman has told Metropolitan Council officials. But even if it were, we don't think public policy in the Twin Cities area should be dictated by the timetables of Washington bureaucrats.