

July 19, 1983

STATEMENT

TO: Members, Steering Committee on Southwest/University Avenue Corridor Study

A. Introduction

In 1982, following a change in the Metropolitan Council's transportation policy plan concerning fixed-guideway transit, several local agencies began efforts to organize a detailed corridor-level study of light rail transit. In September 1982, an application for federal funds for such a study was filed with the Urban Mass Transit Administration. The application was approved in December 1982. The budget for the study is approximately \$625,000, of which \$500,000 will be federally funded. The balance of the study costs will be provided in staff time and services of participating agencies.

The study will be conducted by a team of consulting firms: Barton-Aschman & Associates, Bechtel Civil and Minerals, Robert Harmon and Associates, James B. McComb and Associates, Martins Mapping and Engineering, and Professional Design Services.

A project Steering Committee, composed of policy-level representatives of the participating agencies, is the decision-making body for the study. Membership is as follows: two representatives each from Minneapolis, Saint Paul, Hennepin County and Ramsey County, and one representative each from Hopkins, Minnetonka, St. Louis Park, the Metropolitan Council, the Metropolitan Transit Commission, the Minnesota Department of Transportation, and the University of Minnesota. A Project Management Team, made up of one professional staff representative of each affected agency, is providing support for the Steering Committee. Based on the consultant study, the Project Management Team will make the key recommendation of the preferred transit alternative in each corridor to the Steering Committee. The Steering Committee will then select the preferred alternative.

The Steering Committee has called two public hearings for July 1983, on the "scoping report" for the study. This report lays out the specific alternatives which are to be studied by the consultant. Those alternatives are: (1) no-build, that is, do nothing; (2) transportation system management (TSM), which involves a variety of low-capital and no-capital transit improvements; (3) busway, and (4) light rail transit.

Two corridors are included in the study, the southwest corridor, which generally follows the Chicago and Northwestern Railway tracks from the Lake Minnetonka area to downtown Minneapolis, and the University Avenue Corridor, which follows University Avenue and I-94 between downtown St. Paul and downtown Minneapolis. The study is to be completed by December 1984.

Supposedly, the Urban Mass Transit Administration and the Minnesota Legislature would be asked to provide financing for whatever proposal emerges from the study.

B. Citizens League concerns about the study

Several points need to be addressed to assure the quality and credibility of the final report and recommendations of the study:

1. The importance of evaluating alternatives on the basis of how close to home the rider is picked up or delivered.

Four out of five trips taken by Twin Cities area residents begin or end at home, according to the Metropolitan Council. This means that transit alternatives -- to compete effectively with the personally-driven private car -- must do a good job of coming close to the home of the individual. This is based on the assumption that the major share of increased ridership will come from so-called "choice" riders -- individuals who have other options for travel, most likely their own personal cars. Of course, the situation would be dramatically different if other choices were not available. While there is concern over the price and availability of fuel, it seems to us that this study must recognize that choice of mode will be available for individuals for the foreseeable future.

2. The importance of being clear on the assumptions concerning the relative cost of the personal car in years to come.

The study should spell out specifically the Steering Committee's and the consultant's assumptions about the cost of car ownership and operation and the relative cost of the personal car in years to come, and the extent of car ownership. Will the cost likely be a larger or small portion of disposable household income than today? Is car ownership likely to increase, decrease, or remain the same? These assumptions are very much related to our first point, above. If costs of the personal car remain as competitive with other choices as they are today, then it will be all the more important that an alternative offer many of the advantages which the personal car offers.

Implicit in the cost of the personal car, of course, are the assumptions concerning operating costs including the cost of fuel and the degree of fuel economy that will be built into cars in coming years.

3. The importance of being clear on the assumptions concerning the types of individuals who are likely to pick between the personal car and a transit alternative.

We have seen preliminary figures concerning the projections of future travel in the corridors under study. In evaluating the alternatives, however, the Steering Committee and consultants must include their assumptions about the occupations, incomes, working hours and other factors which might relate to making a transit choice. This is critically important, because irrespective of its ability to attract other populations, a viable transit alternative must attract a substantial number of the heavy home-work, work-home travel in the morning and evening rush hours.

4. The importance of specifying assumptions on "speed."

The study must make clear the assumptions concerning the impact of differences in travel times on the likelihood of persons to choose a transit alternative to the personal car. These assumptions need to be spelled out in terms of

total door-to-door travel time, including time spent waiting or walking. They should also be explicit on the number of times an individual must transfer from one vehicle to another and the assumptions concerning the impact of such transfers on the individual's choice.

5. The importance of specifying assumptions on the price of parking.

The study must be clear in its assumptions about the relative cost of parking for individuals who are likely to choose between using their personal car or the transit alternative. This must include, too, the price of parking in various locations, increases in prices expected and an assumption concerning the degree to which employers provide reduced-price or free parking to their employees. For example, if a downtown employer pays the expense of parking for its employees, will that affect the likelihood of an employee choosing a transit alternative?

6. The importance of providing specific information, by origin and destination, on future ridership to and from the major centers.

Preliminary information from the study already takes note of the projected growth in total rush hour trips to the major centers in the year 2000. However, it is important that the study be specific on the projected number of trips to each major center, by itself, compared to the actual number of trips today, because that will give a more realistic idea of the potential transit ridership. Moreover, the projected trips need to be identified by corridor, because persons will be coming from all directions, not just the direction of the transit improvement.

7. The importance of expressing projections within a range of possibilities.

Ridership projections are nothing more than that. Yet they are essential for informed decision-making. But because such projections are subject to error, the study should express its projections more in terms of a likely range -- high or low -- than in terms of one figure. In expressing the range, the study could say, for example, that there is a 50-50 chance of the projection being within such-and-such range, with an 80-20 chance of the projection being within another range.

8. The importance of providing assumptions on likely changes in land use ordinances.

Selection of some transit alternatives might be based on their potential to stimulate changes in land use -- specifically the construction of high-density housing nearby. If the study bases ridership projections on such land use changes, or if the study justifies the selection of an alternative based on its ability to accomplish such changes, then it is important that the study be explicit about its assumptions on whether localities will rezone property to permit such higher-density development. In addition, the study needs to lay out the implications of such changes in land use. That is, if higher density housing is concentrated in certain locations, where would such housing have been located in the absence of the construction of the transit alternative and any accompanying changes in land use ordinances? To express the question another way, would those parts of the region which already have land zoned for high-density housing lose some of their expected development to other, newly-rezoned, parts?

9. The importance of making explicit assumptions concerning the penetration of the downtowns.

Some alternatives would involve bringing transit vehicles into the heart of the downtowns, which would help increase ridership, since persons would not have to walk or transfer to another vehicle for the last leg of the trip. But for some alternatives such an approach could add significantly to the total cost, making it too high for such alternatives to be realistically considered. The study needs to state its assumptions about the issue of penetration of the downtowns, how this would be done, the location and cost of doing it.

The question of the preferred transit alternative -- as well as the question of the penetration of the downtowns -- relates, too, to the question of the systems of internal circulation serving the downtowns and their surrounding environs. For example, what transit alternative for the corridors under study would be best if some sort of fixed-guideway circulating system were provided around the fringes of the downtowns?

10. The importance about being explicit on the impact on existing bus routes.

The study needs to be explicit about whether certain bus service would be replaced by a transit alternative. For example, if light rail transit were offered on University Avenue, with stops every quarter or half-mile, would the existing 16A bus service, with stops every block, be discontinued? If not, what would the cost impact be? If so, what would happen to ridership? Would additional bus service be needed to feed the transit alternatives?

11. The importance of being explicit about assumptions on costs, both capital and operating and the sharing of them.

The study should suggest a likely range of federal participation, not just one figure. In terms of the local share, the study needs to lay out the cost impact if the local share were paid by the areas which most directly benefit. If areas which do not benefit directly are asked to share in the costs, the study should offer rationale for such sharing.

The study should also be explicit on its assumptions about use of such tools as tax-increment financing, about the level of projected fares, the use of benefit district financing, and regional property and non-property taxes.

12. The importance of giving the consultants broad enough alternatives from which to select a preferred alternative.

We were not encouraged by the Steering Committee's preliminary decision to rule out personal rapid transit (PRT) from consideration as one of the alternatives. We do not advocate that solution, and harbor no illusions about its potential, since it is not a "proven" technology. Nonetheless, it is clear that the PRT issue will continue to be discussed actively in the community. Whatever its technological advantages or disadvantages, the PRT issue does serve to focus the debate on the type of service which is required to attract riders. In evaluating whether to include PRT in the study, the Steering Committee might want to think ahead to the completion of the final report. What types of questions is the Steering Committee likely to encounter at that time if the option is included? If it isn't?

In summary, we believe this fixed-guideway transit study must be held to a high standard of accountability if it is to be something more than another chapter of fixed-guideway studies which have reappeared in the Twin Cities area about every two years since the late 1960's.

The Steering Committee and consultants have an obligation to assure that all options will be evaluated honestly. They must not be afraid to come to grips with the facts, however painful they might be for advocates of certain transit alternatives.

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