

STATEMENT BY THE CITIZENS LEAGUE TO THE
PUBLIC HEARING ON THE TRANSPORTATION CHAPTER
OF THE METROPOLITAN DEVELOPMENT GUIDE, NOV. 9, 1972

We strongly support the proposal developed by the Metropolitan Council for this Development Guide chapter -- as a substantial attack on the transportation problem of the Twin Cities area. We think it is a well-planned, realistic and aggressive program for the development of transit.

Transit must be seen as service . . . service that is used . . . if we are serious about drawing people away from the single-passenger owner-operated automobile. Vehicle systems are important so far as they provide this kind of competitive service. The vehicle system is only a means to an end. It is not an end in itself, and much goes into 'transit' beyond a vehicle system.

Because we believe successful transit depends so heavily on providing a service genuinely able to compete with the automobile, we have concluded -- for reasons we will explain -- that the 'family of vehicles' concept is probably unsound, as a basis for the system we build -- if it is meant to apply to the individual transit trip.

The key concept, as this community moves now to push up the proportion of trips carried by transit, ought to be flexibility . . . the use so far as possible of existing investment and the minimization of the risks that go along with major 'sunk' commitments of capital resources -- at least over the near and medium term, until some of the major uncertainties which presently still cloud the picture can be resolved.

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Like most of the people here tonight, we are not technical experts. Few of us are competent to talk about engineering, or construction or operating cost considerations.

We are interested in the transportation problem. The Citizens League, in 1965, was one of the first to propose creation of a Metropolitan Transit Commission. In 1966, after the Legislature had taken no action, it was at the League's urging that the first joint powers transit commission was formed, and the first real transit planning studies begun. We returned to this with a major study in 1969-70, and we have -- beginning this fall -- still a further study exploring the problem of promoting usage of transit.

In all these studies, and all these points, we have simply tried, as citizens must, to think as clearly as possible about the central policy issues that face this community -- and its transportation agencies -- as they move now toward a decision about the future transportation and transit program.

We think the problem lays out about as follows:

1. The most useful focus is on the problems growing out of our present dependence on the single-passenger, owner-operated automobile. The present volume of traffic does not appear to be critical, except at a relatively few points, at relatively few times. Yet we sense a general agreement that really very large volumes of traffic are coming, with the growth of the area over the next several decades.

And we sense a growing feeling . . . most importantly among road engineers . . . that major affirmative efforts must be made to reduce (rather than simply to handle with additional road construction) this larger volume of traffic.

These volumes of traffic impose real costs on the community. The time lost in congestion is one real cost. Another is the degradation of air quality. Another is the very large investment of public money that must be made in freeways and other road facilities to accommodate the volume that moves during the 20 hours of "peak" travel per week. And another is the disruption this highway construction creates in the community, and the related noise, visual and other costs that are spilled into private accounts.

2. A transit program, therefore, consists of a set of public actions to develop alternative vehicle systems, and to adjust the price/service relationship between these and the single-passenger, owner-operated auto in such a way as to carry out effectively the public policy decision to push up the proportion of total, or peak-hour, trips, using the transit mode. The central effort (again) must be to develop an alternative which will genuinely be able to compete with the automobile for riders. And the transit program . . . both in its character as a 'hardware' and as a 'software' system . . . must approach this problem of usage directly.
3. Ideally, the vehicle system ought to provide a service fully competitive with the service offered by the automobile. Like the automobile, it ought to take a passenger from where he is to where he wants to go. It ought to be fast; it ought to be available, almost as soon as the passenger decides he wants to take a trip; it ought to provide a seat for every passenger; it ought to be safe and, if possible, of course, it ought to free the passenger from having to be, himself, the driver.
4. Unfortunately, it appears this ideal system is not likely to be built in the Twin Cities area at a very early date. We must therefore choose between two lesser alternatives, each of which has some undesirable features. We're not ourselves competent to resolve the debate about whether a community-wide PRT network can or cannot be built. It is our impression that, over the last year, the consensus of both technical and policy people is that, at this time and for a combination of engineering cost and esthetic reasons, this sort of PRT is not desirable, or possible, or both. (Our argument, at least, is based on the assumption that this is the conclusion basically reached.)
5. The community's struggle, now, is to decide which of these two lesser alternatives represents, on balance, the most prudent choice. Each offers one or more characteristics of the 'ideal' system, without the others. Essentially, it appears:
 - * We could have a system automated in about the way the MTC presently proposes . . . which would lack the capability of PRT to take a rider from his origin to his destination in the same vehicle. Or,
 - * We can have a system which has at least the capability of carrying people roughly from where they are to where they want to go without a change of vehicles in the trunkline portion of the trip . . . but which, essentially, will not and cannot be automated.

6. If this accurately describes the nature of the choice, we think the wisest course for the community would be to adopt the second. This has the advantage of minimizing the amount of capital resources irretrievably sunk. It best lends itself to changes and adjustments in the transit system which may be necessary as a result of future changes in the development pattern or in transit technology. Since the vehicle, under this system would not be fixed to the guideway, it offers the potential, at least, for single-vehicle service . . . moving for the trunkline portion of its trip in its reserved right-of-way, or guideway, and then -- at either end -- circulating on existing surface streets relatively close to the points of origin and destination. We continue to feel this 'no transfer' feature is of critical importance to the success of any transit system in its very tough competition with the level of service provided by the automobile. We have discussed this question of the impact of transfers on patronage with individuals experienced in the planning and operation, both of bus and of airline systems. In both cases, the answer has been the same: "Do not design a system involving a transfer if this can possibly be avoided." Finally -- and again because the vehicle is not fixed to the guideway -- this system offers increased opportunities for the use of expensive vehicles to earn revenue at off-hours from the daily work trip.
7. A strategy of 'flexibility' seems proper, too, because of the important aspects of the transportation and transit problem which do remain unresolved. We believe -- as we have indicated -- that the Twin Cities area has made quite remarkable progress in the past ten months. But a discussion of this complexity takes more time than that. And we do not believe it is yet really completed. Specifically, it seems to us:
- * This community is not yet really clear with itself what it is trying to achieve in its transit program. This is not our judgment alone: It has been expressed to us by people closely associated with the transit program in recent years. Are we, for example, primarily trying to solve the problems of the people who do not, or cannot, own automobiles? Or, are we trying primarily to reduce automobile congestion and therefore the construction of additional freeways? Or, are we primarily interested in transit for its hoped-for impact on land values and tax base? The ambiguity about this issue argues for keeping commitments as loose as possible, at least for the time being.
 - * There is no decision yet about what the future shape of the Twin Cities metropolitan area is to be. It would seem this ought to be known . . . either if transit is to shape, or to follow the shape of, the region. Our understanding is that, for the time being, at least, the Metropolitan Council has decided to defer this decision. And it would appear -- as, from a look at housing -- that some inconsistent policies are, in fact, being pursued with respect to the expansion both of the suburbs and of the central cities.
 - * The Twin Cities area is still too much inclined to think about transit as 'hardware' . . . and too little focused on the problems of building transit usage (the other side of the coin from reducing auto usage) directly. It would be foolish, of course, to study alternatives down to the last detail. But an investment of the sort we're now contemplating ought not, equally, to be made without a reasonable study of the major aspects of the various alternatives. And we think it is fairly clear that several considerations are, still, essentially unexplored.

Because of our traditional focus on 'hardware', studies about ways of building

demand are only really beginning. The whole concept of 'road pricing' is largely unknown, here. Efforts at direct regulation of the automobile, and parking, are only just beginning -- as, at the University. It was not until last year that the Legislature began the changes in transportation finance which can, if continued, work down some of the artificial stimulus to automobile usage. Efforts to convert the bus system from 'routes' to 'service on demand' (or even to the flexible routing used by school buses) still lie ahead of us. The interior of the bus is evolving gradually into something much more like an airplane cabin, but still has some distance to go before the lighting and seating afford a privacy comparable with the airplane, or private automobile.

Tests and demonstrations of PRT in high activity centers are not yet completed . . . though they may not be far away. These would seem to have considerable potential for the collection and distribution of passengers in congested areas where it is difficult to bring the trunkline vehicle. Several high activity centers . . . the downtowns, Southdale/494/Normandale, Cedar-Riverside . . . have such demonstrations under serious consideration. Their results will be important, as the system evolves.

8. We believe the proposed Development Guide is realistic, also, and defensible, in what it proposes about the future of road and highway construction.

We concur with the thrust in the proposed Guide to establish a preference for transit within the Interstate 94 ring. We concur with the proposal that new freeways not be cut through the urban area within this freeway ring.

We concur also with the general conclusion of the Development Guide Committee that there is no way this metropolitan area is going to develop without substantial additional road construction in the developing suburban fringe. There is an important issue here which needs to be recognized . . . and which it would be a serious mistake to overlook in some general opposition to the construction of roads and highways. This is the question whether the developing suburban grid of freeways occurs through a gradual expansion of the existing county road system . . . widenings, tree cuttings, signalization and gradual access control . . . or whether it occurs in the form of new, fully access-controlled facilities on new alignments (regardless of the jurisdiction -- state or county -- by which they're constructed). We strongly favor -- as does the Development Guide -- the latter. We think that the Twin Cities area has had enough experience with the gradual upgrading of existing county and state highways . . . typically resulting in a decision, in the end, to move over to the side and take a new alignment. It is through this process that Highway 65 (Lyndale Avenue) eventually was transformed into Interstate 35 through Richfield. It would be far better to get these new rights-of-way established and built early.

9. The agencies involved in this transportation discussion -- both the Metropolitan Council and the Metropolitan Transit Commission -- deserve great credit for what has been accomplished. Despite the numerous studies, the Twin Cities area made little progress toward a policy decision in the years from 1961 to 1971. It was still a long way from a major policy decision a year ago, at the time the Council and the MTC held their week-end seminar at the Sheraton-Ritz Hotel. In the twelve months since then, more issues have been addressed, more open public discussion has been had, than in the ten years prior to that week-end meeting. As a consequence, this metropolitan area is remarkably close to the kind of major policy decision about the future of its transportation system that really no other urban area in the country has been able to make.

We must not fail to see, therefore, how much has been accomplished . . . how much is agreed upon . . . and how relatively small is the disagreement that remains. There is no real disagreement, we sense, that -- inevitably -- the transit system in the Twin Cities area is going to evolve gradually . . . step by step . . . adding improvements, year by year, as operating experience and the progress of transit technology make these seem reasonable. It seems clear to us that virtually nothing in the way of a different technology can be built, and put into operation, in this metropolitan area within perhaps 10 to 15 years, at any rate. For the time being, then, the only thing we have to build . . . and what we must build . . . is usage. If we fail to do this now, it may be that no new-technology system will be completed -- or will succeed, when completed. And if we do this now, and successfully, the choices about technology may look a good deal clearer to us, within a relatively few years, than they are today.

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10. We believe it is essential to have a plan for the financing of transit . . . and that this should build on the policy established by the Legislature in 1971. At that time, the Legislature came to realize the extent to which the transportation system . . . the road system, in particular . . . continues to be financed, at the local level, out of charges to property. The use of this general revenue source was, no doubt, necessary when the road system was first developed and when usage was light. Typically, we have always gone to the general property tax for the start-up of such major new fiscal systems. The road system as it exists today, with its heavy use by drivers and vehicles, has an enormous ability to generate revenues adequate not only for its operating costs, but also for its capital costs. Roughly speaking, it remains true today that about three-quarters of the direct costs of the road system at the municipal and county level are financed, in one way or another, by charges to property. The Citizens League argued two years ago that it would be possible and desirable to extend, somewhat further, the concept of user charges to financing of the auto/highway mode. Even a relatively small shift in this direction would free up quite substantial amounts of property tax revenue to finance a much-improved and expanded transit system . . . and, quite possibly (depending on how the numbers are set) without any net increase to the property tax levy. We strongly urge that this be the starting point, again, as finance proposals are developed for the 1973 legislative consideration.