

Summary of Meeting with Scott Halstead
Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437
Friday, May 2, 2008

Guest speaker: Scott Halstead, member, Shoreview Greening community, volunteer analyst of Central Corridor LRT proposal

Present: Verne C. Johnson, chair; Chuck, Clay, Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (by phone), Jim Olson (by phone), and Clarence Shallbetter (by phone)

A. Context of the meeting--The Civic Caucus is reviewing the structure of highway and transit priority-setting in Minnesota. During meetings on this subject several speakers have addressed the proposed Central Corridor LRT line between downtown Minneapolis and downtown St. Paul in Civic Caucus meetings. Scott Halstead, one of some 800 Civic Caucus electronic participants, had emailed his Central Corridor analysis to the Civic Caucus. He was subsequently invited to a Civic Caucus interview to discuss the analysis.

B. Welcome and introduction--Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced Halstead, a resident of Shoreview, who recently retired from a 27-year federal career in several capacities, including purchasing and contract management, with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Upon retirement, wanting to participate as a citizen in making a difference, he has served as president of a federal retiree chapter, co-chair of Citizens Forum, member of Shoreview Greening, an environmental and transit group, the Shoreview Environmental Quality Committee, and the Citizens League.

C. Comments and discussion--During Halstead's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

1. The Shoreview Greening had concern about the inadequate northeast suburban transit service--About a year ago, they requested someone to look at the Central Corridor LRT proposal, to learn the process of obtaining rapid transit, so we could advance transit in the northeastern part of the metro area, Halstead said. It quickly became apparent that the Central Corridor didn't seem to be a wise transit investment of \$900 million, given the fact that the corridor already is well-served by bus transit, that 75 percent to 90 percent of Central Corridor riders will come from existing bus service and that the Central Corridor LRT would be very slow and not extendable.

2. Absence of Central Corridor LRT speed--Initial planning documents that Halstead said he received estimated an LRT ride of approximately 35 minutes between the two downtowns. However, as he pieced together details he found that the actual ride would take approximately 45 minutes. Moreover, many express buses that now provide a 30-minute ride on I-94 between the downtowns would be removed from service, with passengers expected to take LRT instead. Some express riders might forego switching to LRT if they're unable to take advantage of speed on I-94.

He said he has submitted his material to the Metropolitan Council and has received no statistical rebuttal.

3. Review of current transit service in the Central Corridor--The Central Corridor has what might be considered the best bus service in the metro area, Halstead said:

--Route 16 buses on University Avenue, running every eight to 10 minutes during peak hours, and stopping at every block. This route serves about 4.7 million passengers a year, many of whom are taking rides of three miles or less and then transferring to other routes.

--Route 50 express buses on University Avenue, with about 1.3 million passengers a year.

--Route 94 express buses on I-94 paralleling University Avenue with about 1.1 million passengers a year.

In further discussion it was noted that because of such heavy activity, bus service along University Avenue currently is among the most cost effective in the Twin Cities area with up to 70 percent of operating expenses being recovered from the fare box. Fares yield about 30 percent of such expenses system wide. Several different destinations are served, downtown St. Paul, the Midway area, the University of Minnesota, and downtown Minneapolis.

4. Difficulty in running the LRT down the middle of University Avenue--About six more traffic signals will be added to some 34 signals already on the route, and LRT trains will not over-ride the signals. Traffic signals are needed so that passengers may safely cross University from either side to reach the LRT trains in the middle, as well as to allow vehicles to go back and forth on the cross streets. Traffic signals will hold down speed, of course. But safety of passengers will also be at risk because University Avenue passengers will be required to walk across to get to the LRT stations.

5. Inconvenience of less-frequent stops--University Avenue buses now pick up passengers every block. The LRT line will pick up passengers every half-mile or longer, which will require some riders to walk three to six blocks more to get to a station. Such steps at best would inconvenience some persons and at worst would deter them from riding, he said.

6. Inadequate attention to operating expenses--Most of the public attention has been focused on an estimated \$900 million in capital expense, one-half of which is anticipated to be received from the federal government. However, there's been very little attention to operating expenses, he said.

Slow LRT vehicles on the Central Corridor means slower travel time for riders,

which inevitably increases the cost per rider per trip and the operating costs he said. Halstead said he has had considerable difficulty obtaining reliable LRT performance data and bus ridership data. Projections of operating expenses on the Central Corridor exceed the bus system. Advocates for the project seem reluctant to face the question of calculating long term costs and negative impacts upon others, he said.

It was noted that a true picture of projected operating expenses and the portion funded from the fare box in the Central Corridor needs to include the three or four bus lines that will continue or will be added.

7. Removal of parking on University Avenue--To maintain two lanes of regular vehicle traffic on University in addition to the LRT line, it will be necessary to remove about 675 parking spots along University Avenue, where on-street parking no longer will be allowed, he said. Businesses will definitely be affected, and land for off-street parking as a replacement doesn't seem to be available. It doesn't appear as if the expense of replacing the parking spots is included in the cost estimates for the Central Corridor. Expenses for other forms of re-development including land acquisition for housing or retail/commercial or any incentives for re-construction or densification also need to be known.

8. Difficulty in crossing the Mississippi River--Current plans call for the Central Corridor to use Washington Avenue and the existing Washington Avenue bridge through the University of Minnesota. (The University is suggesting an alternate route to the north.) The Washington Avenue bridge is 52 years old and will need to support two-car or three-car LRT trains running in both directions, adding as much as one million pounds to the bridge. Such additional weight will undoubtedly require more reinforcement on an already 52-year-old structure, he said.

LRT ridership would decline significantly if LRT doesn't penetrate the heart of the University of Minnesota by following Washington Avenue, a member observed. Costs soar when tunneling is involved, the member said.

9. Halstead's preferred approach--Halstead said he'd prefer a south route adjacent to I-94 or a north route along already-existing rail tracks between Minneapolis and St. Paul, along with tunneling under the University of Minnesota, possibly as far as Hwy. 280. A high speed connection between the two downtowns is essential for a successful rail system, he said. If the connection is fast, then in the future one can imagine spokes to the east, north and south. If the connection is slow, a worker from Woodbury on the east, with a destination in downtown Minneapolis, is not likely to tolerate a slow link, having already ridden a faster LRT spoke from Woodbury to downtown St. Paul. The Central Corridor connection needs to be the fastest link, not the slowest, he said. We should be looking ahead 60-70 years, he said.

10. Question of penetrating the middle of the downtowns-- LRT trains from the Central Corridor will share the 5th Street rail line in downtown Minneapolis with the

Hiawatha line, which will add about seven trains in each direction each hour in downtown Minneapolis, he said. Halstead noted that the Denver LRT follows the freeways and exclusive railroad right of ways which provide people with a fast ride and a good alternative to driving alone on a congested freeway. The LRT that enters downtown Denver, makes a short trip and loop downtown with free shuttle buses on the 16th mall. He contended that short routes or tunneling provide faster, lower cost service in the long run than trying to bring the LRT line longer distance at street level into the middle of the downtown.

11. Current transit decision-making structure is faulty--Halstead said he doesn't think the 2008 Legislature should have separated rail and bus transit policy between the counties and the Metropolitan Council. He said he supports a unified structure for highways and all transit.

12. Invest more resources--The Twin Cities area should invest more dollars to build the right kind of LRT system, Halstead said. He noted that riders pay by zones from \$1.75 inner city up to \$4 to ride the system in Denver, which is a considerably higher fee than is imposed here. Their sales tax also is higher than ours.

Halstead favors an employment-based income tax surcharge or a parking tax as ways to provide revenue for metro area roads and transit.

13. Requiring landowners to share the expense--A Civic Caucus member asked whether landowners near the LRT line will receive all the benefit of increased value without having to share the expense. Halstead said he agrees that such landowners could legitimately be required to pay a share.

14. Question of insufficient transit capacity--It was noted that Peter Bell, chair of the Metropolitan Council, has said that without the Central Corridor LRT there won't be enough transit capacity in the corridor to accommodate demand in the year 2030. Halstead said that Bell probably is right in connection with the need for transit in the University of Minnesota area and in downtown Minneapolis, but not all along University Avenue.

15. High-speed transit needed in Central Corridor--Not wanting to be misunderstood, Halstead said he strongly favors light rail in the Central Corridor, but it must be fast to work. The current proposal involves spending a great deal of money and receiving very little in return. He thinks it would be very possible to build a high speed LRT system on existing rail right-of-way located north of University Avenue or adjacent to I-94 between the two downtowns. In fact, he said, the Metropolitan Council envisions commuter rail in that area by the year 2030, in addition to light rail on University Avenue. We should build one good rail transit system with capacity can be increased and the line extended, he said.

He repeated his feeling that recovering funds from benefiting property owners and a parking tax should be considered as revenue sources.

16. Thanks--On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked Halstead for meeting with us today.