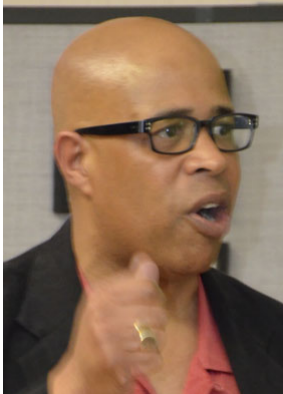


Seeking transit justice

Written by Lydia Schwartz
Wednesday, 14 May 2014 15:35

Minneapolis, MN—On May 10, community members met with a panel of Metropolitan Council members and local transit riders to discuss the proposed Southwest Light Rail Transit METRO Green Line Extension (SWLRT) and address the racial inequities present in the regional public transportation system.



The forum was held at the Minnesota chapter headquarters for Neighborhoods Organizing for

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Change, located at 911 West Broadway Avenue. The member-led, nonprofit works to build power in communities of color through community organizing, civic engagement, and leadership development. Michael McDowell, a transit organizer for Neighborhoods Organizing for Change, has implemented a North Minneapolis bus canvass to see what the typical rider thinks the system is lacking. He finds that people simply want equitable investments from public dollars. "As we develop this billion-dollar light rail project," McDowell said, "we need to make sure the communities that rely most on transit will benefit from it. This is a crucial opportunity for us to increase racial equity in our transit system, and make it work better for all of us."

According to the Metropolitan Council, the SWLRT project will cost approximately \$1.7 billion and will be funded through federal, state and local sources. Gov. Mark Dayton has approved an additional \$400 million in contingency funding, should the project be approved by the federal government. The proposed 15.8-mile line will extend the Central Corridor Light Rail Transit from downtown Minneapolis through the rapidly growing southwestern communities of St. Louis Park, Hopkins, Minnetonka, and Eden Prairie. The Southwest Corridor contains a concentration of businesses, including several of the state's largest employers.

The SWLRT has the potential to either improve racial and economic equity in North Minneapolis or make things sorely worse. The Metropolitan Council currently plans to warehouse diesel trains in the Linden Yard next to the proposed Van White station, located next to Van White Memorial Boulevard and the North Cedar Lake Regional Trail. This would seriously undermine the ability of the Harrison Neighborhood to develop diverse housing, small businesses and open space, and to carry out its Bassett Creek Valley Master Plan, opponents to the plan argue.

Most community members agree that the SWLRT could benefit North Minneapolis, but only if it is designed in an equitable way. Metropolitan Council Member Gary Cunningham (District 7) represents north Minneapolis, downtown Minneapolis, south-central Minneapolis and the City of Robbinsdale on the seventeen-member council. At the public forum he addressed the history of public policy relating to transit that has actively disenfranchised the north side of Minneapolis and the African American community. He is a strong advocate for a modern streetcar that can fit along narrower corridors and begin to reverse the disinvestment of the past with new jobs and housing.

"Well-planned economic development and investment are crucial pieces to moving toward equity Cunningham said. "Equity means that people of color simply have a seat at the table and the ability to determine the future of what their community will be... It's not just about equal opportunity, but making sure that the history of denying opportunity based on race gets addressed. We need to develop economic opportunities and we need our public institutions to support that."

Affordability and a reliable bus system with higher frequency routes that could connect them to a light rail station are major hurdles for many low-income residents that would benefit from SWLRT. Metropolitan Council Member Adam Duinick (District 8), representing the eastern portion of Minneapolis and the City of St. Anthony, argues that reducing fares in targeted stations along the alignment would actually generate more money; and that raising fares for a deteriorating service is not an option.

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"In some stations where we've lowered fares," Duininck said, "we've seen that the fare box revenue actually improves. In other words, lowering fares can actually be more of a net positive in terms of operations. I've been pushing this and I like the idea of certain corridors as reduced fare [like downtown Minneapolis.]"

The current, unacceptable conditions of bus shelters in disrepair across North Minneapolis, however, leave many residents discouraged that the Metropolitan Council will take their concerns seriously. Metro Transit is currently in the process of reacquiring bus shelters within the City of Minneapolis after it ended its maintenance contract with CBS Outdoor earlier this year. However, little is likely to change unless it is directly negotiated into the improvement plans to benefit lower-income transit riders.

"African Americans make up the majority of bus ridership," Cunningham said. "I am in favor of people of color being at the table, having a voice in the decisions being made for them. Otherwise, we're going to wind up with what we've been getting—cold bus shelters... If it took public policy to get us here, it's going to take public policy to get us out."

SWLRT is a crucial opportunity for communities who rely on public transit, but are frequently left out of the conversation. Metropolitan Council Member Jennifer Munt (District 3)—whose district includes the cities of Chanhassen, Eden Prairie, Minnetonka, and stretches west into Carver County to Minnetrista and St. Bonifacius—was also present at the public forum and agrees that a more sustainable and resilient Twin Cities region depends on easy, affordable access to good jobs for everyone.

"Poverty is about having access to money," Munt said. "And for that, people need to have access to education and jobs. [North Minneapolis] has undergone decades of disinvestment, and it's not going to be easy to fix."