



Summary of meeting with Arlene McCarthy

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, July 18, 2008

Guest speaker: Arlene McCarthy, director, metropolitan transportation services, Metropolitan Council

Present: Verne Johnson, chair; Paul Gilje, Jim Hetland (by phone), Dwight Johnson, John Mooty, Jim Olson (by phone), Wayne Popham (by phone), and Clarence Shallbetter (by phone)

A. Context of the meeting— Today's meeting is one of several the Civic Caucus has been conducting to understand how decisions on transportation projects are made in the Twin Cities metropolitan area.

B. Welcome and introduction— Verne and Paul welcomed and introduced Arlene McCarthy, director, metropolitan transportation services, Metropolitan Council. She has served with the Metropolitan Council since 1988 and in her current position since 2006. Her department oversees development of long-range plans for highways, transit and airports in the metro area and coordinates these plans with MnDOT and local governments.

McCarthy's first served as a senior engineer and manager in the environmental services division of the Metropolitan Council and later moved to Metro Transit. She began her career with a major international construction company, working on highway and industrial projects across the country. She holds a civil engineer degree from Washington State University and is a registered professional engineer.

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

1. Importance of the Metropolitan Council policy plan for transportation— The Council now is in the process of updating its policy plan for transportation, which is required to be updated every four years. McCarthy expects the Council to adopt the new plan this December.

The policy plan has taken on special significance this year because of a new metropolitan transit group established by the 2008 Legislature. The new group is the Counties Transit Improvement Board (CTIB), whose job it is to distribute, via grants, funds from a one-fourth penny increase in the sales tax

in five metro area counties, Anoka, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey, and Washington. The revenue is to be used for transitways. The CTIB will be exclusively a grant-making body. It will not build or operate transit facilities itself. The reason the Metropolitan Council's policy plan is so important is that the law requires that CTIB grants be consistent with the policy plan. Therefore, any given transitway that the CTIB might favor needs to be listed in the policy plan to be eligible for funding.

Members of the CTIB include two commissioners from each of the five counties plus the chair of the Metropolitan Council. Voting strength is based on population and sales tax revenue. The chair of the Metropolitan Council is given five votes out of 100.

McCarthy emphasized that the policy plan gives equal treatment to roads and transit. That aspect, she said, was a particular feature of the Council's 2004 transportation policy plan. Previously, she said, transit had not received as much emphasis as roads. One of the participants noted criteria for determining the trade off between investments in roads/highways and transit such as congestion relief, mobility, ownership of autos, and parking charges at the non-residential trip end are not explicit and the process for considering projects in the policy plan do not weigh or trade off these investments because funding for them comes from different pots of money.

2. Transitways defined— The Metropolitan Council has a broader definition of what constitutes a transitway than do many participants in the CTIB, McCarthy said. The Council includes the following types of projects:

- * commuter rail (such as the Northstar line from Big Lake to Minneapolis)

- * Light rail (such as the Hiawatha line)

- * Bus rapid transit, also known as BRT, such as new bus-only lanes planned for Cedar Avenue and High Occupancy Toll (HOT) lanes for I-35W.

- * Express bus lanes (which McCarthy distinguished from BRT as giving buses an advantage but not traveling at posted speeds.)

A Civic Caucus member noted that the new metro sales tax is apparently not to be used to buy buses to replace obsolete existing buses, to make improvements to the existing bus lines or to provide funding for new bus lines. Similarly, except for a short time, these funds are not to be used to pay for the operating deficits for any existing bus or LRT lines or for any of the new transitways built from the new sales tax. Such operating deficits can total anywhere from 80 to 60 percent of the operating costs, averaging now about 72 percent.

3. Coordination with MnDOT is important— Peter Bell, chair of the Metropolitan Council, and Tom Sorel, MnDOT commissioner, meet monthly, and other staff of the two agencies meet more frequently, she said.

4. LRT needed to expand transit capacity— The main reason for building the Central Corridor LRT line between the two downtowns is that travel forecasts reveal that the existing bus system can't meet

demand in that corridor in future years, McCarthy said.

The Central Corridor line will serve many passengers whose destinations are the University of Minnesota, downtown Minneapolis, and downtown St. Paul as well as along the entire corridor. You won't necessarily see large numbers using the line to travel all the way from one downtown to the other, McCarthy said. This pattern is similar to the existing pattern of transit trip demand on the route 16. The bus route 94 currently serves a downtown to downtown transit trip demand. It is not clear whether the existing level of service every 20 minutes during the day on this route will continue after construction of the LRT. One participant noted it was also unclear how much express bus service was affected in south Minneapolis and from downtown to the mega mall after operation of the Hiawatha LRT began.

5. Importance of higher-density job locations— A Civic Caucus member observed that 85 percent of the jobs in the metropolitan area are located elsewhere than in the downtowns of Minneapolis and St. Paul. However, the focus of transit planning seems to be concentrated on the downtowns, rather than the other job destinations.

For transitways to succeed, McCarthy replied, they need a high concentration of jobs at one end and along the corridor to produce high volumes of riders in rush hours and for all-day service. It's very difficult to find such concentrations in other locations, such as suburb-to-suburb, she said. With transit, everyone wants to go everywhere. The tradeoff is productivity versus coverage, she said. In other words, do enough people want to make the same trip to justify the service?

6. Difficulty in serving lower income persons— McCarthy and Civic Caucus members discussed the fact that employment locations for lower income persons don't necessarily coincide with the higher density locations needed for success of transitways and bus service. Many lower income persons aren't likely to live near transitway stations. Moreover, even if lower income persons have good access to transitways from their homes, their opportunities for jobs are more likely to be scattered across the metropolitan area, not concentrated near transitways.

Employers in widely scattered sites across the region (e.g. discount retailers) need a good pool of employee prospects, whose homes also are widely scattered across the region. One person suggested that lower income individuals might be provided vouchers to purchase the best transportation option for themselves, based on their specific trip needs. Such a strategy might reach more individuals than a strategy of only building transitways, the person said.

7. Guiding development— McCarthy suggested that more attention needs to be given to implications for transit before new employment or housing developments are approved. As a positive example she cited housing and jobs in the vicinity of the 28th Avenue station on the Hiawatha LRT line in Bloomington. She agreed with a questioner that it's much more difficult to provide such transit access in locations such as the 494 strip in Bloomington. The Central Corridor in St. Paul is well situated for LRT, McCarthy said, because there's already a built-in base of transit ridership on the 16, 50, and 94 bus routes in that corridor.

8. Strategic location of park and ride lots— McCarthy said park and ride lots might be looked at,

effect, as concentrations of residential development, artificially created. The lots bring together people from scattered homes to create the necessary densities to make express service and transitways feasible. It's important, she said, that park and ride lots be built not only where land is available, but where there's excellent access to freeways.

9. Proposed studies of transitways— A Civic Caucus member asked about the status of several proposed studies of transitways that were introduced in the 2008 Legislature. The Metropolitan Council, in its transportation policy plan that was updated in September 2006, listed five "Tier 1" transitway corridors: Cedar Avenue, Central, Northstar, Northwest/Bottineau and I-35W. The policy plan listed three other "Tier 2" corridors, Red Rock, Rush, and Southwest.

The 2008 Legislature approved funds for Cedar Avenue (BRT), Central (LRT), Northstar (commuter rail), and I-35W (BRT). In addition, according to a state law passed in 2008, the Metro Council is required to initiate negotiations with the Federal Transit Administration to secure federal funds for a single comprehensive program of rail transitway development to include the Red Rock, Rush Line, Southwest Corridor transitways, and an extension of Northstar commuter rail to St. Cloud. One participant noted there was no provision for the Bottineau line to the northwest of Minneapolis.

Proposed studies for transitways that were vetoed in 2008 were Bottineau Boulevard Transitway - \$500,000; I-94 East Transitway - \$750,000; I-494 Transitway - \$500,000; and Robert Street Transitway - \$500,000. It was unclear where the specific requests for studies contained in the capital bonding bill came from. A Civic Caucus member noted news reports suggested many of them, especially those vetoed by the governor, came from the Ramsey County Rail Authority rather than the Metro Council.

McCarthy said the Metropolitan Council is looking at potential ridership, capital expense, and operating expense for several corridors.

10. Importance of coordination— McCarthy said the Metropolitan Council sees that it is very important to have good coordination with other jurisdictions, including cities, counties, the CTIB, MnDOT, the Transportation Advisory Board (an inter-agency body that advises the Metropolitan Council), and the federal government. If a fundamental difference occurs on consistency with the transportation policy plan between the Council and the CTIB, an arbitration process would be followed. McCarthy doesn't expect that the Council will make any proposals to the 2009 Legislature for changing existing arrangements among the various jurisdictions.

11. Conflict between promoting commuter rail and controlling urban sprawl— McCarthy was asked how the Metropolitan Council could support long distance commuter rail to St. Cloud, to Red Wing and to Rush City, when it is trying to encourage more compact urban development in the Twin Cities area. She replied that the Council believes that new development would be concentrated around transit stations.

12. Comparison with other states— The transportation decision-making structure here is complicated but McCarthy believes it works well in comparison with that of other states. She said Portland, OR, and Denver, CO, appear to be doing quite well.

13. Building rail on top of an expanding road system?— Taking note of current highway construction in the northwest suburbs for County Road 81, and construction of Hwy. 61 in the southeast suburbs, a Civic Caucus member wondered whether rail projects are being planned concurrently or whether they'll be added after the expanded road system is built.

14. Congestion pricing?— Responding to a question, McCarthy said she supports various pricing mechanisms to manage traffic. One person suggested that a tax on parking ought to be included in the mix, because some people choose free outlying lots and use transit just to avoid paying for parking downtown.

15. Thanks— On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked McCarthy for meeting with the Civic Caucus.