

Price of Southwest Corridor light rail going up

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Published: September 9th, 2011

FTA pledges help for local officials in finding money

The cost of the Southwest Corridor light rail transit project is increasing — not by a ton, relatively speaking, but it's still going up.

A week after the LRT line received an important federal approval, the project's price tag officially is moving up by \$75 million to \$125 million. That means the total could move from \$1.25 billion to as much as \$1.375 billion.

The increase is happening because the Federal Transit Administration, in giving the OK for preliminary engineering, also ordered local project officials to fold the cost of relocating a freight line in St. Louis Park to accommodate light rail traffic into the overall cost of the Southwest project.

"The Federal Transit Administration wants to expand transit options and create new jobs in the Twin Cities," Brian Farber, associate administrator for communications at the FTA, said in a statement Friday.

"However, there is no question that the freight rail line must be relocated for this project to move forward, and FTA will work with community leaders and project sponsors to identify additional funding for this project."

Several local officials have been saying this week that the FTA move to fold relocation into the Southwest LRT was a surprise. They had expected the two projects to continue to be considered separately.

For the last couple years, the Metropolitan Council's stance has officially been that it did not want the cost of the freight rail relocation considered in the total budget of the Southwest LRT because it would increase the cost of the project.

But the FTA says its move should not come as a surprise. At the preliminary engineering stage of any project, everything is tossed onto the table.

"The FTA is calling the shots," Hennepin County Commissioner Peter McLaughlin said Friday. "They're saying study it together and that's fine — we'll go with that."

"We're really encouraged that the project is going forward. It's just the new puzzle; every stage is a puzzle you have to solve."

The chosen route of the Southwest LRT would cover almost 15 miles between Minneapolis and Eden Prairie, passing through St. Louis Park, Hopkins and Minnetonka.

Officials hope to start construction in 2014, with trains operating by late 2017 or early 2018.

Right now, freight rail passes through what is known as the Kenilworth Corridor. The brouhaha is all about whether and where to relocate the freight traffic to make room for the Southwest LRT in the Kenilworth Corridor.

The most likely relocation would be to the Minneapolis, Northfield and Southern Railway (MNS)



The Southwest Corridor LRT would operate similar to the existing Hiawatha LRT (pictured).

tracks west of Highway 100 in St. Louis Park.

The estimated cost of relocating the freight rail is \$75 million to \$125 million — and it could be more.

The MNS handles a couple of freight trains a day now, but rerouting would mean that four to six heavier and longer trains a day would travel along the path, which passes close to more than 180 houses in St. Louis Park and St. Louis Park High School.

Last month, the city of St. Louis Park asked the Minnesota Court of Appeals to get involved. The city is appealing a Minnesota Department of Transportation decision not to pursue additional investigation into how relocating freight traffic would affect the environment and community. The city believes studies so far have underestimated the impacts.

The city also wants to continue to discuss possible solutions with the county. County officials say they won't meet as long as there is pending litigation .

Meanwhile, the FTA wants the issue resolved before it will give the Southwest Corridor LRT project permission to enter the all-important penultimate stage known as "final design."

Once a project is in final design, it's just about got the full-funding grant agreement from the FTA — the federal government's commitment to pay for 50 percent of the project. The Central Corridor LRT project received its full-funding grant agreement a couple of months ago.

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