

Southwest LRT-freight rail impasse in St. Louis Park

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City and county are at loggerheads; FTA wants resolution

Officials with Hennepin County and St. Louis Park sparred at a public meeting Wednesday over a freight-rail relocation issue that left unresolved could threaten the newly advanced Southwest Corridor light rail transit project.

As it happens, the freight-rail relocation may have already increased the cost of the project now estimated at \$1.25 billion — because of an important decision the Federal Transit Administration announced last week.

On Friday, the FTA gave the Southwest LRT project permission to move into preliminary engineering. In doing so, the FTA upped the stakes in the freight-rail relocation issue by ordering that the “cost and scope” of the relocation be included in the cost of the project “regardless of the funding sources that may be identified to pay for the work.”

Competing estimates of the cost of relocating homes and businesses range from \$75 million to \$125 million but could be higher.

For months, project officials had been saying that the LRT and freight-relocation projects were separate and that the FTA agreed they were separate.

Now everybody — Hennepin County, St. Louis Park, the Metropolitan Council and even interested citizens — wants to know the impact of the FTA’s decision to link the two.

An FTA spokesman had not responded to questions as of late Wednesday afternoon.

But whether the FTA’s decision breaks the impasse between Hennepin County and St. Louis Park is uncertain.

At a meeting Wednesday morning of the Southwest Corridor Management Committee in St. Louis Park’s City Hall, discussion turned sour when the relocation issue came up.

Last month, St. Louis Park filed an appeal with the Minnesota Court of Appeals over a state Department of Transportation decision that additional investigation was not needed into the environmental and community impacts of the relocation of the freight rail to what is known as the MNS line.

The freight rail needs to be relocated to make room for the Southwest LRT in the Kenilworth Corridor, through which the freight rail now passes.

St. Louis Park is arguing that the studies done so far have significantly underestimated the cost of the mitigations needed in the city if the relocation happens.

The litigation, Hennepin County officials contend, prohibits other discussions between the two parties about resolving the controversy.

“I feel compelled to say the St. Louis Park City Council has a standing resolution opposing the relocation,” said Anne Mavity, a member of the St. Louis Park City Council who represented the city at the meeting. Mayor Jeff Jacobs was out of town on business.

“We believe other options exist,” Mavity continued, adding that city leaders were willing to meet on the issue at any time.

Hennepin County Commissioner Peter McLaughlin, who heads the Hennepin County Regional



Anne Mavity

Rail Authority, countered that a mitigation discussion was out of the question as long as the appeal remains active.

"You are at a fork in the road," McLaughlin said to Mavity. "And you're still sitting there. The city of St. Louis Park needs to figure out whether it wants to litigate or have a discussion."

The FTA, meanwhile, has said the issue must be resolved before project officials can get the all-important permission to enter "final design," which puts the project in the homestretch for approval.

The FTA pays 50 percent of any transportation project that passes its substantial muster.

In interviews after the meeting, both Mavity and McLaughlin said before the two sides can make their next move they need clarification from the FTA about its order to fold the freight relocation into the Southwest LRT project.

But Mavity said it was her opinion that the FTA's decision to make that order "appears to support what we've been saying all along — that these are linked projects."

Mavity added that she did not know if the FTA move will cause St. Louis Park to reconsider its appeal.

St. Louis Park opposes making way for light rail by moving freight rail traffic from the Kenilworth Corridor to the MNS line, the route that several recent studies — including one by Hennepin County — have identified as the best for freight trains. The city has not officially identified which of as many as five other alternatives it prefers; most say the only viable option is running both LRT and freight along Kenilworth.

McLaughlin blasted the Kenilworth co-locating idea.

"Keeping [the freight rail] on Kenilworth is horrible for development in St. Louis Park," McLaughlin argued, explaining that the freight route would crisscross the LRT tracks and cause safety concerns that would severely hamper the hoped-for redevelopment along the LRT line.

"St. Louis Park needs to look at their long-term redevelopment potential," with the freight rail out of the way of the LRT line, McLaughlin said.

The Kenilworth Corridor connects near West Lake Street and goes north between Cedar Lake and Lake of the Isles to just south of Interstate 394.

The MNS handles about two freight trains a day, but the 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 as well as St. Louis Park High School.