

Southwest light rail gets preliminary federal OK

by Bill Clements

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The Federal Transit Administration (FTA) on Friday gave its preliminary blessing to what would be the third major light rail transit project in the Twin Cities metro area — the \$1.25 billion Southwest Corridor.

Officials with the Metropolitan Council and Hennepin County had been waiting anxiously for the approval letter since July.

While significant, the approval does not mean the federal government is promising that it will pay half of the \$1.25 billion cost of the 15.8-mile LRT line — or \$625 million. But it is a major step toward securing that promise and those dollars.



The existing Hiawatha LRT (file photo)

And the project has to overcome several major hurdles before receiving that financing, including resolving issues over relocating part of a train line in St. Louis Park and nailing down the state's commitment to pay its \$125 million share with a state Legislature leadership that is hostile to transit.

The FTA's approval letter also said that the Met Council's timeline estimating that the Southwest LRT would begin operations in April 2017 was "overly aggressive" and suggested that the first quarter of 2018 made more sense.

Still, the FTA's giving the project an OK to enter what is known as preliminary engineering was a cause for celebration at the headquarters of the Met Council in St. Paul and of Hennepin County in Minneapolis.

"What this means in the eyes of the FTA is that we have a sound and viable project that will create jobs and benefit employers as well as those who live and work near the transitway," Met Council Chairwoman Susan Haigh said in a news release issued late Friday afternoon.

During preliminary engineering, which will take about two years, project partners will finalize plans for where stations will be built and how, and refine the estimated costs of the project as well as its benefits and impacts.

If the project receives FTA approval to enter final design and obtains federal funding, construction will begin in 2014.

The corridor will pass through Eden Prairie, Minnetonka, Hopkins and St. Louis Park and link with the Central Corridor line in Minneapolis, becoming the 26-mile Green LRT Line.

"This is an important milestone," said Hennepin County Commissioner Gail Dorfman, a longtime Southwest LRT proponent and former mayor of St. Louis Park.

Financing for capital costs is expected to come from four sources: The Counties Transit Improvement Board's five-county sales tax (30 percent), the Hennepin County Regional Railroad Authority (10 percent), the state of Minnesota (10 percent) and the FTA (50 percent).

"The Counties Transit Improvement Board is investing in more than mobility and congestion relief — it's investing in jobs," said CTIB Chairman Peter McLaughlin, who is also a Hennepin County Commissioner.

Minneapolis Regional Chamber of Commerce President and CEO Todd Klingel said the

