

Some in north Minneapolis fear impact of Bottineau LRT

by Bill Clements

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One woman, in a heavy Liberian accent, summed up the feelings of many at a meeting in north Minneapolis on Thursday night about the proposed Bottineau transit line.

"Why are you guys putting us through this?" she asked.

Several dozen north Minneapolis residents in the audience made a couple of things clear at the sometimes raucous meeting with Hennepin County transit planners.

First, they don't want an LRT project to rip up their community.

And second, they haven't gotten enough information about it yet.

Organizers held the meeting at a Plymouth Avenue hall for a specific reason: to get input about three possible options through their community for a potential route for the Bottineau Corridor known as D2 (D2A, D2B and D2C).

Transit planners got an earful about the proposed routes, which would travel through north Minneapolis along Penn and Oliver avenues. And many advocated another route altogether, called D1 by planners, which bypasses north Minneapolis by following the BNSF railway along Highway 55 (Olson Memorial) through Theodore Wirth Park.

"What is in place for north Minneapolis — how are you going to protect the people living here now?" asked Mary Anderson, a community organizer with the Brooklyn Park-based African American Action Committee and program director for a Brooklyn Center nonprofit called Village Child.

"D1 is what we should be getting," Anderson added. "That can bring light rail to the area and not destroy this neighborhood."

Several audience members objected to a printed survey distributed at the meeting that asked them to rank their opinions on how well each D2 option met community needs and other issues.

"Why would you force us to pick among options we don't want?" asked Roxanne O'Brien, a north Minneapolis resident and an organizer with the Northside Residents Redevelopment Council. "Come back to the table with options that we actually want!"

Several said they worried about the safety hazard of walking through alleys to get into their houses if a transit line blocked access from the street. Others said they feared losing their homes altogether to the project and asked how the government would determine the fair market value of their property.

Joe Gladke, Hennepin County's manager of engineering and transit planning, tried to reassure them that they would not lose out — and they might even gain.

"The government might have to pay you more than the fair market value of your home to move you into a comparable home," Gladke said.



The Bottineau transit route known as D2C would require 110 or more homes and businesses to be demolished on the west side of Penn Avenue between West Broadway and Olson Memorial Highway to make way for light rail transit trains on Penn Avenue — like these. (Staff photo: Bill Klotz)

That did not ease the concerns of some audience members, and that's when state Rep. Bobby Joe Champion, DFL-Minneapolis, who represents the area, worked to calm the anxious crowd.

"Today is to talk about D2 and for you to talk about how it will impact you — and then as a community you have the opportunity to say if you want [any of the options.]"

When that didn't satisfy more than a few people in the crowd, Champion tried again.

"My parents live on Oliver Avenue, and what I'm saying to them is that this meeting tonight is about the technical aspects of the options," Champion said. "Your questions are totally legitimate, but they won't be answered tonight."

Barbara Lightsey, chairwoman of the NorthPoint Health and Wellness Center in north Minneapolis and an elder in the community, voiced concern about how project information was getting to the community — or not.

After the meeting, Lightsey said she wants people working on the project to be very clear with the people in the community about what's going on.

"I need the people of this community to understand that there is a crucial meeting coming up," she said, referring to a Nov. 14 meeting of the Bottineau project's policy advisory committee at Brooklyn Park City Hall.

"Information is power, and when it isn't presented clearly, then all the bells start going off about mistrust," Lightsey said.

The Bottineau system, named after a major highway in the area, would extend north from downtown Minneapolis about 15 miles and end in Maple Grove or at the Target campus in Brooklyn Park.

Planners put the cost of a light rail system at nearly \$1 billion and a bus rapid transit system at \$500 million.

The LRT route that would go through north Minneapolis would cost about \$50 million more than the LRT route going through existing railroad tracks in Theodore Wirth Park.

If all goes as regional planners hope, Bottineau would be the metro area's fourth light rail transit system — after the existing Hiawatha line; the Central Corridor line, which started construction in February and should be in operation by 2014; and the Southwest Corridor line, which is a bit further along in the planning process than the Bottineau Corridor.

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