

No 'excess parcels' for Central Corridor

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Construction staging equipment rests inside a 648-square-foot temporary easement space that the Central Corridor project purchased for \$6,400 from Episcopal Homes, just west of Fairview Avenue on University Avenue in St. Paul. (Staff photo: Bill Klotz)

LRT project avoids a Hiawatha problem, but process can be bumpy

When the Hiawatha light rail line in Minneapolis was completed in 2004, the Metropolitan Council ended up with a handful of small, oddly shaped pieces of land that had been used as staging areas for construction equipment.

Met Council planners knew these state-owned "excess parcels" were going to be hard to dispose of — and so they wanted to avoid them in the construction of the Central Corridor light rail transit line.

But they couldn't avoid them after building the Hiawatha.

That's because back in the 1960s, the Minnesota Department of

Transportation started buying and assembling some 360 parcels, while contemplating building a major freeway along what is now the Highway 55 corridor.

Neighborhood opposition scuttled those plans, though, and the compromise became Highway 55 as it exists today. Still, the land acquisition involved in the planning for a major freeway along that corridor laid the groundwork for construction of the Hiawatha LRT.

But those excess parcels have indeed been difficult to dispose of: In 2005, the Met Council, through the city of Minneapolis, put out requests for proposals on the six highest-priority parcels, hoping to attract transit-oriented developments (known as TOD).

After nearly six years, TOD projects have happened on two of the six parcels and are planned on another two. The remaining two may never be developed.

So, heading into construction of the Central Corridor LRT line a few years ago, Met Council planners "didn't want to have to deal with a bunch of small and odd pieces of land that would be hard to assemble into anything," said project spokeswoman Laura Baenen.

As it turns out, the Central Corridor project is able to handle this challenge differently — mostly because the majority of the land needed for building the LRT line and staging the construction equipment is already public right of way.

"There has been no acquisition by our partners or us of additional properties that ultimately will be considered 'excess' properties," said Mark Fuhrmann, deputy general manager and head of transit projects for Metro Transit, an arm of the Metropolitan Council, which is building the Central Corridor LRT.

Fuhrmann also helped shepherd the Hiawatha project.

For the planning of the Central Corridor project, "We did not really need to look at purchasing lay-down [or construction-staging] areas," Fuhrmann said. And that was an advantage "because it made our project more competitive" in the long list of transit projects in the nation seeking 50 percent federal funding.

"We didn't need to add that in and burden the project," he added. "We wanted the most competitive project possible."

The project planned and budgeted for purchasing 72 temporary construction easements along the Central Corridor —basically leasing land for a defined period — though only a few will be used for staging areas.

For the most part, Fuhrmann said, the contractors were responsible for finding room in the public right of way to be used for staging areas.

Most of the temporary easements are there to provide "elbow room" for contractors. They are back-of-the-curb areas that give contractors room "to demolish the old curb and build the new curb for the new University Avenue," Fuhrmann said.

The smallest temporary easement is only 24 square feet, while the largest is 13,000 square feet.

The Central Corridor project budgeted \$29.8 million for buying properties as needed through either temporary or permanent easements, or outright purchase.

To date, the Central Corridor project has spent \$2.8 million of that \$29.8 million, Fuhrmann said.

An as-yet-undetermined chunk of that \$29.8 million will go toward the one outright land purchase the project will have to make — and that purchase is proving difficult.

The land in question is at the former Diamond Products-Gillette site in Lowertown, just off downtown St. Paul at Fifth and Broadway streets.

Crews are already busy working on transforming part of that 21-acre site into the operations maintenance facility for the Central Corridor line.

But negotiations with the two owners of the property have been difficult, and a hearing before a condemnation panel is scheduled Oct. 12 in Ramsey County District Court.

In most of the temporary easements, a purchase agreement either has gone or will go easily. Some have not gone well.

The easy ones would include the project's purchase of its largest temporary easement so far: 10,480 square feet at the St. Paul Public Schools Student Placement Center, 2102 W. University Ave. in St. Paul, for \$168,250, Baenen said. The project has access to that square footage until Dec. 1, 2014.

Another easy purchase is a much smaller staging area: 648 square feet in a temporary easement for \$6,400 in front of the Episcopal Homes just west of Fairview Avenue on University Avenue. That purchase is also good through Dec. 1, 2014, Baenen said.

At least one such case hasn't gone easily — the purchase of permanent access to and a temporary easement at the Central Presbyterian Church, 500 Cedar St., in St. Paul.

The two sides are negotiating the project's acquisition of "an access point" or driveway into the church from Cedar Street, which has to be closed because the LRT tracks will be crossing the driveway, and there's no safe way to maintain that access.

They are also negotiating the purchase of a 2,644-square-foot temporary easement on the north side of the church property. Negotiations include payment to the church "for measures to be implemented to mitigate loss of the access," the Met Council has said.

Last week the Central Corridor project received permission to initiate eminent domain proceedings in this case if needed. The church is withholding comment, hoping for an agreement with the Met Council.