

Met Council provides equity commitment response

By: [Cali Owings](#) August 6, 2014 3:00 pm, Finance and Commerce

The Metropolitan Council is following up on [requests](#) to build more racial equity into the \$1.653 billion Southwest Light Rail Transit project.

The Metropolitan Council published [documents](#) Monday that show how it will address transit service, land use, jobs, affordable housing and other issues [raised in May](#) by a coalition of 30 groups representing communities of color.

North Minneapolis leaders have said that without specific commitments, the 16-mile line from Minneapolis to Eden Prairie will provide little benefit to low-income communities and people of color in one of the city's most transit-dependent and underserved areas. The group has requested improved transit service, greater amenities on bus routes, access to jobs, affordable housing, resources to stabilize communities and commitment to prioritize funding development at the [Van White station](#) – on the edge of north Minneapolis near the Harrison neighborhood.

In a [20-page document](#) released Monday, the Met Council and its transit service division, Metro Transit, outline current regional policy, summarize planned service improvements and regional plans and specifically address north Minneapolis and the Southwest project.

Many involved in seeking equity commitments for the Southwest project said the Met Council's response was a good step forward but noted further conversation was necessary to fulfill promises and secure investment.

"A lot of this is about trust," said Aasim Shabazz, president of the Masjid An-Nur mosque in north Minneapolis. "This has not been approached before, it's innovative in and of itself and there's a lot of ambiguity to navigate."

The Met Council's response can be vague on exactly how the commitments outlined will be delivered. Shabazz said that's a concern because it's an election year and community leaders might be working with an entirely new set of Met Council leaders when it comes time to implement some of the ideas in the plan.

Ishmael Israel, with the Northside Residents Redevelopment Council, said the Met Council's response is not the "usual song and dance," but it lacks discussion of how resources will be allocated to address the group's requests.

"I don't want to find the region in a place where we have the Met Council saying 'Our will is the will of the people, but we don't have the financial resources,'" Israel said. "We shift out of that innovative space back to business as usual."

One of the group's most immediate concerns was a lack of bus shelters and other amenities like heat, light and security on north Minneapolis bus routes and in other high-demand areas. Over the next 18 months, Metro Transit plans to add or replace 150-200 bus shelters in the region and

Metro Transit has committed to 24 new and 15 replacement shelters in north Minneapolis. Stations with greater amenities will be brought into north Minneapolis with the development of future bus rapid transit lines planned for Penn Avenue, Emerson-Fremont and West Broadway Avenue. Metro Transit will also add light and heat to station areas through a Ladders of Opportunity grant later this year.

Israel said he sees Metro Transit's commitment to the C Line, a bus rapid transit route on Penn Avenue, and its connection to the Southwest line as one of the concrete examples in the Met Council's response.

The coalition also sought access to jobs associated with the project during project development and construction as well as the major regional employers located along the line once completed. The group asked the Met Council to increase its [equitable hiring goals](#) from 32 percent people of color and 6 percent women for construction jobs to 40 percent people of color and 10 percent women. While the Met Council retains that goal for the project, "the Council will strive to exceed the goal based on available workforce," according to the document.

The coalition also suggested using a community-based organization to recruit and train people for construction jobs to ensure a pool of well-qualified minority and women workers. In its response, the Met Council said that approach would need further research. It also notes that, "By the time the SWLRT project begins construction, several projects that now have an Employment Assistance Firm (EAF) will be completed." Hiring workers that have already been trained through those programs for Southwest LRT will be a priority.

The Met Council was also asked to facilitate development near the Van White station where the Harrison neighborhood is hoping the rail line will be catalytic for the 230-acre Bassett Creek Valley plan. Adjacent to the proposed Van White station is nearly 25 acres of property known as [Linden Yards](#) currently under study by Ryan Cos. US Inc. for potential office and residential uses.

But the Met Council asserts it has a limited role to play in future land use around the station: "The Council heard the concerns of Harrison leaders and local businesses and will work with governmental partners to help facilitate the resolution of differences on the land use around the Van White Station. However, station area planning must be led by the city of Minneapolis." Though Anthony Newby said he is optimistic that dialogue will continue, the Neighborhoods Organizing for Change executive director said the Met Council has not done enough to connect equity outcomes to north Minneapolis.

"North Minneapolis has the potential to be radically transformed in a very deliberate way," Newby said. He added that Gov. Mark Dayton, who has already played a role in facilitating the Southwest project, should help close equity gaps.