

Metropolitan Task Force testimony, January 5, 2023

My personal experience with the Metropolitan Council is limited to the placement of a stop for the new E Line Bus Rapid Transit route. I will briefly summarize my interactions with the council regarding the bus stop siting, and then, based on this experience, I will present my impressions about the Metropolitan Council as it is currently constituted.

My condo association and I opposed the placement of a new E line bus stop adjacent to our driveway at the foot of the Hennepin Bridge on First Avenue NE. This bus stop, that will also serve four other bus routes, will be upstream from our driveway and, when a bus is at the stop, will make it much more difficult to judge when to cross First Avenue in order to make a left turn at Main Street which is just a short distance from our driveway. We pointed out the potential for either a T-bone crash or a blockage of the bus at the stop if a resident misjudges when to make their move into traffic from behind the bus. I personally drove all of the existing Metro Transit bus rapid transit routes and could not find a stop sited next to a driveway with the same rush hour traffic volumes and speed, the same large number of routes serviced at the stop, and the same difficult maneuver required by drivers exiting the adjacent driveway. Based on my professional experience teaching collegiate modeling and simulation courses, I told Metro Transit that it would be necessary to perform a detailed traffic simulation in order to understand this problem. To the best of my knowledge this analysis was never performed and the Metropolitan Council approved the siting of the bus stop next to our driveway. For more details you can consult my emails which are appended to the electronic version of my testimony.

As a result of my experience, I have three conclusions regarding the Metropolitan Council as it is currently constituted:

- 1) Members of the Metropolitan Council are not qualified to monitor the complex development projects undertaken by the council. They do not ask difficult and probing questions of staff members when they make presentations. In fact, they don't ask many questions at all and simply rubber stamp staff recommendations. They appear to be completely dependent on staff to guide these complicated engineering projects.

- 2) Members of the Metropolitan Council do not engage with the members of the public that they represent. In the case of the bus

stop siting that I described, the Transportation Subcommittee suspended public comment at the meeting where they gave final approval to the location of all of the E Line bus stops. This was done even though members of the public, including our city council member, were present and had prepared testimony.

3)The decision making process of the Metropolitan Council is opaque. While staff members do hold public comment sessions and take copious notes, the detailed steps that are taken to reach a final recommendation are never made clear. Any internal studies or external expert analysis is not made publicly available.

Finally, I would like to offer pros and cons regarding the proposal to elect instead of appoint members of the Metropolitan Council.

There are several advantages to electing the members. Assuming that they want to be re-elected, they would, of necessity, become more accessible. I also believe that they would be more willing to engage the staff in more detailed and probing discussions instead of simply praising them as contributors to the team, as now appears to be the case. Because members would be beholden to the public, electing instead of appointing them also has the potential to make the decision making processes less opaque and to make internal documents available to the public.

However, electing the members of the Metropolitan Council does not solve all of the problems that I experienced. Most importantly, it does not guarantee that members will have the expertise necessary to critically evaluate and monitor the complicated projects that the Metropolitan Council undertakes. Electing members with agendas that are contrary to the stated goals of the Metropolitan Council could also slow progress and lead to dysfunction. I encourage you to explore the history of the Minneapolis Park Board for examples of what happens when elected members have disruptive personal agendas.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Metropolitan Governance Task Force.

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***** correspondence regarding siting of E Line bus
stop *****

***** email to Hennepin County Commissioner, sent July
14, 2023 *****

I am writing to express my unhappiness with how Hennepin County, the Metropolitan Council, and MetroTransit have handled the decision to place an E Line bus stop at 1st Ave NE and 2nd St NE. Residents at the Village Lofts and Village Brownstones have expressed safety concerns about the placement of the stop at this location, the Hennepin County engineer and the MetroTransit planner incorrectly justify the location with unfounded comparisons to existing bus stops, and the Metropolitan Council rubber stamps the design without asking any serious questions. I have appended all of my correspondence with them so that you can better understand my frustration with the process.

As my representative on the Hennepin County Board of Commissioners I am asking you to request a serious safety analysis of this proposed E Line stop. We deserve better oversight of this and all other MetroTransit projects.

Sincerely,

Gary W. Meyer

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***** Station design comments, submitted July 9,
2023 *****

I do not believe that either Metro Transit or Hennepin County has adequately investigated the safety concerns that have been raised about the placement of an E Line bus stop at 1st Avenue NE and 2nd St NE. In particular, the probability of a potentially fatal T-bone crash between oncoming traffic and a car exiting the adjacent driveway while obscured by a bus at the stop has not been evaluated. Neither the Metro Transit planner or the Hennepin

County engineer demonstrated that they understood the complexities of exiting this driveway in order to make a left turn at Main Street when they met recently (June 9, 2023) with residents of the Village Lofts and Village Brownstones who use the driveway to access their homes. No data or traffic simulation studies have been presented to the residents in spite of several requests for this work to be done (see my previous submissions below). This research has not been completed even though the operations of the E line and other bus lines that use the proposed platform could be disrupted by exiting drivers "balking" in the bus lane and blocking the bus when they discover a car coming from behind the bus and they abort their planned movement across 1st Avenue to make a left hand turn at Main Street.

Both the Metro Transit planner and the Hennepin County engineer assigned to this project have attempted to justify this placement with an incorrect claim that it is similar to other bus stops in the Metro Transit system. In the Spring of 2022 I personally visited all Bus Rapid Transit stops with an adjacent downstream driveway (see previous submission below) and I determined that none of them have the set of characteristics that make the proposed stop potentially dangerous. The stop's unique group of properties are as follows: 1) serves three bus lines (4, 11, and 61) in addition of the E line, 2) sees traffic surges during morning rush hours and before evening events, 3) incorporates a dedicated bike lane, 4) is located immediately upstream from an active driveway, 5) is positioned very close to a downstream cross-street that is difficult to safely reach from the driveway in order to make a left hand turn. After the meeting at Kramarczuk's on April 16, 2022 where he first presented this list of stops as proof that the proposed stop would work, the Metro Transit planner thanked me for providing the list (which he apparently copied) in my April 8 E line comment submission (see below) even though I claimed then (and still do) that there is no existing Metro Transit stop that can be used to justify the proposed stop. I challenge the Metro Transit planner to provide a written stop by stop comparison between the proposed stop and those he claims are similar.

This stop placement controversy is analogous to how, prior to the construction of the Southwest Light Rail, concerns expressed by affected residents were handled: people who lived in the area and were intimately familiar with the facts on the ground attempted to tell Metro Transit that what they wanted to do wouldn't work, Metro Transit staff labelled their concerns as simply NIMBY, and Metro Transit staff went forward with no resistance or tough questions from the Metropolitan Council. As evidence of how poorly

Metropolitan Council Members represent the public interest in supervising these public works projects, the chair of the transportation subcommittee suspended all public comment prior to the meeting (June 13, 2022) in which the E line was approved even though members of the public were present to testify! During that meeting only one question was asked by a council member that was related to the stop in question even though significant concerns were submitted in writing by those affected (see mine below). The question asked was (roughly) "How fast will the traffic travel on 1st Avenue after construction?" to which the Metro Transit planner responded (roughly) "I don't know, that's a Hennepin County issue." No follow up question was asked after this response. Why do you think some of us remain upset about the placement of this stop and the quality of the representation we receive on the Metropolitan Council?

Sincerely,

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***** Transportaion subcommittee comments, submitted May 23, 2022 *****

I am writing to express my concern regarding the proposed placement of an E Line bus stop at 1st Avenue NE and 2nd St NE. I do not believe that the Metro Transit planning staff has presented sufficient evidence to demonstrate that this location is both safe and functional for drivers who use this corridor and for residents who live nearby. I am asking you at your meeting this afternoon (May 23) to defer the decision for this E Line bus stop placement until the necessary traffic simulation studies are performed and made publicly available.

The only evidence offered as to the safety of this placement location is that it is similar to other BRT and regular Metro Transit stops currently in the system (discussion notes provided at April 16, 2022 meeting held at Kramarczuk's, 215 E. Hennepin). I have personally visited each of the comparable stops listed by the planning staff, and NONE of them have all or even most of the characteristics of the 1st Avenue NE and 2nd St NE location.

Here is a list of the things that make this proposed siting unique:

- 1) Located at the foot of the Hennepin Bridge, a natural traffic bottleneck.
- 2) Positioned where there is a traffic surge into the city during morning rush hour and before evening events.
- 3) Is being added to this corridor at the same time that existing traffic lanes are being eliminated.
- 4) Serves multiple bus lines (4, 6, 11, and 61) in addition to the E Line.
- 5) Incorporates a dedicated bike lane.
- 6) Located immediately upstream from an active driveway that serves a large condo and townhome complex (Village Lofts and Village Brownstones).

I pointed out these issues in the comments that I submitted to the E Line website prior to the meeting at Kramarczuk's (see attached document). In these comments I asked for traffic simulation studies to be performed prior to making a final decision about placing an E Line stop at this location. To the best of my knowledge these traffic simulation studies have not been done and/or made publicly available.

While it is easy to dismiss the concerns of those of us who live near the proposed stop as simply Not In My BackYard (NIMBY), the fact is that many of us have had personal experience with the complexities of this location for many years (personally, for 15 years). One hopes that Metro Transit and the Metropolitan Council are at least somewhat chastened by their Southwest Light Rail experience where on the ground evidence provided by local residents was apparently ignored during the planning process. For the sake of those of us who will be personally affected for many years by this bus stop placement decision, I hope that you will not make the same mistake this time.

Sincerely,

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[REDACTED]

***** Original E Line comments, submitted April 8, 2022 *****

I am a resident at the Village Lofts Condominiums, and I am writing to express my concern regarding the proposed E Line bus stop on First Avenue NE at 2nd St NE and the suggested repositioning of the 4, 11, 61, 141, and 824 bus stops to this same location. I do not believe that Metro Transit has presented sufficient evidence concerning the safety and time delay impacts that this proposal will have on the Village Lofts and Village Brownstones residents who use the driveway west of this location to merge with traffic on First Avenue NE. In addition, my own inspection of existing A Line and C Line bus stops indicates that Metro Transit has very limited experience with designing Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) stops upstream from heavily used driveways, and has never designed a BRT bus stop (at least for the A and C Lines) that involves the complexities of the proposed stop at First Avenue NE and 2nd St NE adjacent to our residences' driveway.

After taking a couple of afternoons to follow both the A and C Lines in my personal vehicle, I could only identify three stops (out of 80 stops total in each direction) that were immediately upstream from a heavily used driveway. The stops with this characteristic are: 7th Street & Hennepin (northbound C Line), Penn & Golden Valley (southbound C Line), and Ford & Finn (northbound A Line). Of these three, only the northbound A Line Ford & Finn stop is located on a street (Ford Parkway) that carries a volume of traffic similar to what exists on First Avenue NE (interestingly, the Ford & Finn location is also not far from a bridge over the Mississippi). The driveway located next to this stop services a small shopping center containing a Chipotle, a small Target, and a Starbucks. When the A Line bus is stopped at this location, observation of oncoming traffic is obscured for those exiting the shopping center and merging safely onto Ford Parkway is difficult until the bus departs. Depending on the level of activity, a car or two can back up into the parking lot from the driveway while the bus is stationary.

While waiting for a single A Line bus to disembark and board new passengers is not a major inconvenience for the occasional patron of this shopping center on Ford Parkway, there are three

significant differences between this A Line stop and the bus stop proposed on First Avenue NE:

1. The three additional bus lines (23, 46, and 74) that share the Ford & Finn stop with the A Line bus do not use the same platform as the A Line bus. In fact, a separate cut out area has been created for them upstream from the A Line platform. That means that they do not stick out into traffic and obscure the driver's view of traffic from the shopping center driveway. Therefore, people exiting the shopping center only have to deal with the A Line bus. That is not true for the proposed First Avenue NE stop where residents regularly exiting from our driveway will have to contend with the 4, 11, 61, 141, and 824 buses in addition to the A Line bus.

2. There is not a bicycle lane through the middle of the Ford & Finn stop (as there will be for the proposed First Avenue NE stop), and there isn't a dedicated bicycle lane on Ford Parkway. A driver exiting the shopping center near the Ford & Finn stop does not have to deal with bicycle traffic travelling along a separate pathway in addition to automobile traffic and A Line buses on Ford Parkway. The same is not true for the proposed First Avenue NE stop where Village Lofts and Brownstones homeowners regularly exiting from their driveway will have to attend to both automobile traffic on First Avenue and bicycle traffic on a dedicated lane that runs adjacent to the bus stop structures.

3. Drivers merging from the driveway downstream from the Ford & Finn bus stop are entering two lanes of traffic and have a reasonable distance to get into the sheltered left hand turn lane at Cleveland Avenue S. For the proposed First Avenue NE stop, residents exiting our driveway are confronted with three lanes of traffic and getting into the far left lane to make a left turn at NE Main Street requires a gap in traffic across all three lanes. Even without the bus stop, merging into traffic from our driveway is more complicated than it is near the Ford Parkway bus stop.

Given that so few A and C Line bus stops involve an active downstream driveway, I expect Metro Transit to justify its current decision to put an E Line stop on First Avenue NE with some data driven analysis. Given the matter of fact manner in which Metro Transit presented its plan, one would think that such stops are commonplace in its system. The reality turns out to be quite different, and the scarcity of similar BRT stops justifies residents' concerns that what is being proposed is unusual and

potentially dangerous. Here are a couple of examples of analyses that would help residents determine the impact of the proposal on them:

* How do the proposed bus stop structures impact the field of view for a driver attempting to merge onto First Avenue NE from the Village Lofts' and Brownstones' driveway? What happens to the field of view when a bus is at the bus stop? This is a relatively simple diagram to create using a two dimensional top view of the proposed bus stop. Given the computer tools available today, it should also be easy to produce a three dimensional view of the scene from the point of view of the driver. This is basic information that should be made publicly available before any final decision is made. It is commonplace today to include such renderings in public architectural or landscape presentations.

* What is the expected average delay due to traffic and bus activity for a driver attempting to merge onto First Avenue NE from our driveway? How many cars could potentially queue up in our driveway during peak hours of activity? I am not trained as a traffic engineer, but my professional life has made me aware of modeling and simulation tools that are available to answer such questions. If you determine the appropriate probability distributions for traffic, bicycle, bus, and driveway activity (this can easily be done by counting cars, bicycles, and buses over a fixed period of time), you can set up randomized computer simulations that will give you the required answers. These are also results that should be available before any final decision is made.

In summary, I do not believe that Metro Transit has done the analysis and studies necessary to quantify the effects of the proposed First Avenue NE bus stop on the daily lives and safety of the Village Lofts and Brownstone homeowners, and they do not have practical experience with BRT stops of equivalent complexity to simply assume that there will not be high accident frequency or inordinate time delays for the people who live in these communities. There are 115 separate condominiums and townhomes that share the driveway downstream from the proposed bus stop -- probably the equivalent of an entire subdivision of standalone single family homes. By choosing to live in high density housing we already contribute to the environmental goals that many of us share with advocates of mass transit and human powered vehicles. We deserve a more complete answer from Metro Transit to our legitimate concerns regarding the proposed E Line First Avenue NE bus stop.

Sincerely,

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