



'Where the biggies leave off...'

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Hennepin board gives SWLRT additional \$204 million; Calhoun Isles vibration damage issue remains unsettled

By Michael Wilson

The Hennepin County Board voted to give Southwest LRT another \$204,000,000 at a special meeting on May 31, pushing the total cost of the project -- for the moment -- past \$2 billion. But Commissioner Mike Opat was having none of it.

"I've supported the SW light rail project. I support it at the existing budget," said Opat, who represents Brooklyn Park, Brooklyn Center, and several smaller adjacent suburbs. "[But] the problem with this project, and why I'm not going to support the budget increase today, is I think the project is just plain poorly managed. ... [A]fter a decade of planning, this is just too big. This increase -- 200 million dollars solely on the county -- is too big."

Commissioner Jeff Johnson was even more blunt. "Everyone knows I have opposed this project, even when the price tag was much lower," Johnson said. "I just think the cost vs the benefit of this is terrible. It's just terrible. And since then we've incurred what, a 60 percent, 65 percent increase, depending on the numbers you look at. We've doubled the cost, and everyone up here knows this is going to climb even higher. We are not done yet. This is not going to be a \$2 billion project. It's going to be more than that."

Hennepin must cover all cost increases alone.

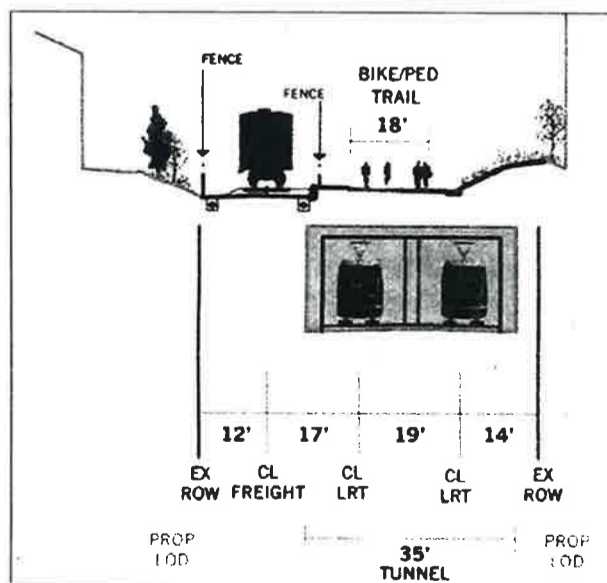
We can't know, of course, what opinions the other five commissioners are expressing behind closed doors. But on May 31, only Commissioners Debbie Goettel and Marion Greene asked a few informational questions. Even Commissioner Peter McLaughlin, Southwest's champion for almost three decades, appeared to those in attendance rather subdued. In the end, by a 5-2 vote, the board approved this latest \$204 million cash infusion for the beleaguered SWLRT project.

What particularly irritated Opat was that, with the 50 percent federal contribution capped at \$928.8 million, Hennepin County is now on the hook for the full amount of this and all future budget increases. "These costs should have been anticipated and included before this went to final engineering, and before the federal share was locked down, before we are exposed to all the increases," he said.

The Republican-controlled legislature backed out of completing its ten percent share of local funding in 2016. The 2017 Transportation bill prohibited the Met Council from spending proceeds of its general obligation bonds to finance any new LRT lines. The bill also allowed the state to continue paying 50 percent of net operating costs for the existing Blue and Green lines but prohibited any state contribution to net operating costs for Southwest.



The Calhoun Isles condominium towers were built as grain silos in 1915 and 1928 and were converted to housing in the early 1980s. In this aerial photo taken in 1929 or 1930 by Joe Quigley, Lake of the Isles is at the top, with Cedar Lake on the left. The Minneapolis & St. Louis RR head off to the upper left through the Kenilworth Corridor. Alcott School (foreground), in service from 1921 to 1940, stands just west of Alcott Triangle near the intersection of West 29th Street and St. Louis Avenue. (Photo: Joe Quigley / Minneapolis Public Schools. Caption: Michael Wilson.)



SWLRT plans call for tunnel excavation 24 inches from condo tower footings and mere feet from 14,500-ton freight trains often carrying ethanol on the other side -- all within a 62-foot-wide right-of-way. (Illustration: SW Project Office. Caption: Michael Wilson.)

And faced with dissension from Anoka County and a decision by Dakota County to withdraw from the five-member Counties Transit Improvement Board, CTIB disbanded last September. CTIB had been slated to pay about 28 percent of Southwest's costs through its quarter-cent regional sales tax, which it was required by law to spend solely on transit projects.

Sales tax can fund road projects too.

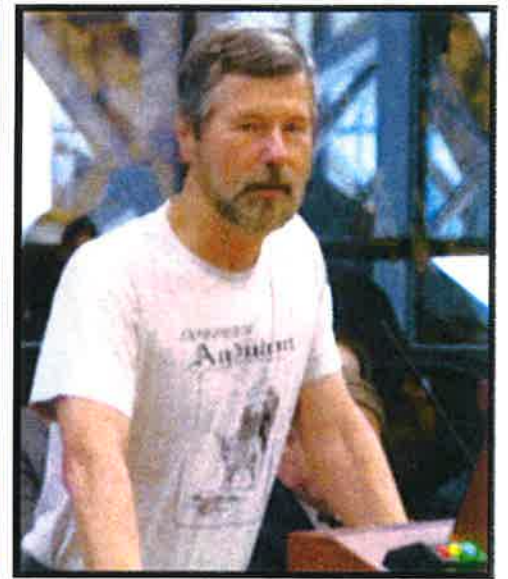
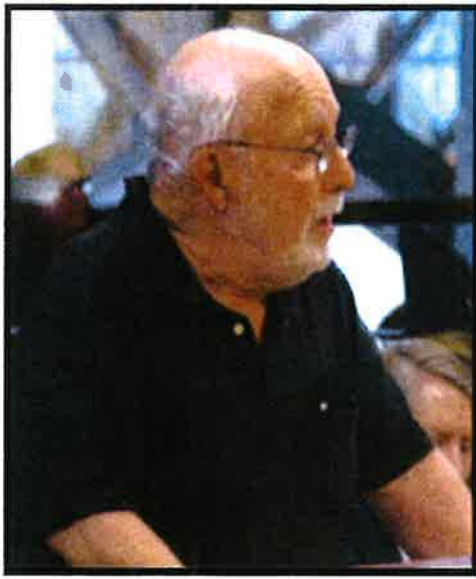
Acting under a different provision of the 2008 law that authorized CTIB, the Hennepin County board then levied a half-cent sales tax which went into effect on October 1, 2017. Although it's often called a "transit tax," implying that it's to be spent only on transit projects -- Southwest and Bottineau come to mind -- it is in fact a **transportation tax**. Hennepin is free to spend the half-cent sales tax proceeds on road and bridge projects as well as far less expensive transit projects like arterial and highway BRT lines.

(Many people have asked why Hennepin didn't hold a referendum about imposing the half-cent sales tax. The answer is: they didn't have to. The counties got that pesky requirement in the 2008 law removed in 2013.)

People in Cedar-Isles-Dean and West Calhoun

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(Page 2)



Hennepin County commissioners held a special meeting on May 31 to discuss the Southwest LRT project's latest need for more money -- this time a \$204,000,000 budget bump that will be paid for entirely from Hennepin County tax revenue. Commissioners voted 5-2 to continue to fund SWLRT's soaring costs. Five people spoke

during the meeting, all of them in opposition, including (from left) Cedar-Isles-Dean residents Michael Rothman and Mary Pattock, Bryn Mawr resident Arlene Fried, and Cedar-Isles-Dean resident Russell Palma. Bob Carney Jr. also spoke in opposition. Project boosters were noticeably absent. (Caption: Michael Wilson.)

already often feel trapped in their homes during parts of the day due to the intolerable traffic congestion on West Lake Street and Excelsior Blvd. -- and it's only going to get worse with the massive new towers west of Whole Foods now working their way through the city's planning process and then with the 30-story high-rises that the city's draft Comp Plan wants to allow at Calhoun Village and Calhoun Commons.

West Lake and Excelsior are both county highways, but there's apparently no money and thus no plans for a major rebuild. Except there could be. By law, the half-cent sales tax can be used for all transportation projects, not just Southwest LRT.

SWLRT, if built, would provide a convenient ride for many Hill and Lake residents boarding at the West Lake or 21st Street stations to the four sports stadiums between here and downtown St. Paul. But in a city intent on densification, the "Southwest" in SWLRT promises service only to the people in Hennepin's southwest suburbs, not to the tens of thousands of people in southwest and south Minneapolis who would use it if its route through the city went where masses of people actually live.

More cost increases appear inevitable.

So is the \$204 million budget bump approved by five of the seven Hennepin County commissioners on May 31 the end of the increases? Hardly. Costs of materials used in construction, including diesel fuel, are soaring. Payroll costs will have to climb in a labor market that is enjoying record low levels of unemployment. Go to <finance-commerce.com> to read a sobering assessment of the situation, "Price volatility may con-

tinue for Southwest light rail" (May 16, 2018).

And then there's the potential budget-buster looming at the "pinch point" in the Kenilworth Corridor, where project planners insist they can push sheet piles down 60 feet to excavate a tunnel 24 inches from the footings of the Calhoun Isles condominium towers on one side and a few feet on the other side from TC&W freight trains weighing upwards of 14,500 tons and often carrying highly flammable ethanol -- all within a 62-foot-wide right-of-way. (See the pinch point cross-section illustration accompanying this article.)

A vibration study of the towers was not part of the October 2012 Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) because everyone still trusted Hennepin County's longstanding promise to reroute the freight trains which were "temporarily" using the Kenilworth Corridor in order to make room for SWLRT. Co-location of freight and LRT became the new reality in January 2013, however, and an LRT tunnel became the chosen way to "thread the needle" through the pinch point.

SW Project Office staff looked into the possible effects of short-term construction and long-term operational vibration impacts on the century-old grain silos for the Final EIS, released in May 2016, and concluded there would essentially be none.

Met Council opposed additional vibration study.

Based on their experience with damage caused by vibrations from construction of the Trammell-Crow (Tryg's site) apartments 180 feet away, the Calhoun Isles board began pressing for a thorough vibration study, which the Met Council strenuously opposed. The council's intransigence finally led state lawmakers, led by Rep. Frank Hornstein and Sen. Scott Dibble, to include a provision in the 2017 Transportation bill requiring the council to "develop

and implement a project-ready plan to prevent vibration impacts" to Calhoun Isles using the results of a "vibration susceptibility study."

Finally, in early April, the Met Council got around to conducting a transfer mobility study done (at their insistence) by their own people. Civil engineers from the Itasca Consulting Group, retained by the Calhoun Isles board, were allowed to observe. The first set of preliminary results were released on May 30 and indicated that construction vibration impacts would likely place the towers at significant risk for damage.

At the May 31 Hennepin County board meeting Commissioner Debbie Goettel asked Jim Alexander, SWLRT project director, about the Calhoun Isles vibration issue. "We recently just looked at that again at the request of the Calhoun Isles folks," Alexander replied soothingly. "We identified there is mitigation needed."

Mary Pattock, one of three Cedar-Isles-Dean residents who spoke at the May 31 meeting, said, "I'm frankly stunned at Mr. Alexander's description of the results of that study. The study was released yesterday. It confirmed the residents' claim and found that Southwest LRT would damage the buildings and would make the West Tower, quote, uninhabitable. It would create dangerous situations that would truly be life-threatening."

Project staff have acknowledged previously that construction at the pinch point going exactly as planned is a make-or-break issue. There is zero margin for error. A person close to the situation indicates that the Met Council is now pushing back against the results of their own study, conducted by their own people. Stay tuned for further developments.