

RETTMAN'S RAMSEY REPORT

Summer 2006

Dear District 3 Resident:

I hope this letter provides you with information on some of the issues being discussed by the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners. The views expressed in this newsletter are mine and/or my staff's and are provided to citizens as a part of my responsibility to keep you informed on what I am doing as your County Commissioner. If I, or my staff, can be of assistance to you please call us at 266-8360 or send an e-mail to janice.rettman@co.ramsey.mn.us.

LRT DISCUSSION MOVES FORWARD

The process of analyzing Light Rail Transit in the Central corridor jumped by leaps and bounds in the last three months as decision-makers met, listened, discussed and made recommendations. In April, the Central Corridor Coordinating Committee, made up of representatives from St. Paul, Ramsey County, Minneapolis, Hennepin County, the Metropolitan Council and MNDOT announced that the Federal Transit Administration had accepted the Central Corridor Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS) for release to the public for review and comment. The Ramsey County Regional Rail Authority then set a 45-day review period including four public hearings. Comments were then forwarded to the Metropolitan Council who will make a final decision on the preferred mode and alignment on June 26. That recommendation and the public comments will be forwarded to the FTA for their review. Once the review has been completed, the FTA will recommend that the project move forward to the preliminary engineering stage, send it back for further analysis based on specific information provided by the public or determine that the project should not proceed. The FTA review and decision is expected by the end of this year.

Alignment Decision Made Earlier

The decision on the alignment for transportation improvements in the Central Corridor was made by the Central Corridor Coordinating Committee in 2004. The Central Corridor is considered the area that includes Interstate 94 and about ½ mile north and south of the freeway. That includes University Avenue and, for practical purposes, could extend north to the railroad tracks adjacent to Pierce Butler Route.

The Coordinating Committee determined that light rail transit, bus rapid transit or bus improvements were the only options and any changes should occur along University Avenue, rather than in or along the I-94 freeway right-of-way, the choice recommended in the early 1990's. Ramsey County Commissioner **Janice Rettman** had requested that the decision on alignment not be made ahead of time because, in part, it would place limitations on the study for transit options and related environmental impacts. Her request was not supported by other Committee members and the limited options were approved for further study. The Commissioner, however, abstained from voting on the proposed alignment until the community and bus users had been heard.

Requests to Extend the 45-Day Period

After many months of staff reviews, re-writes, correcting and updating information, the Federal Transit Authority (FTA) approved the DEIS for public review. For her part, Commissioner Rettman identified several pages of items in the technical data that needed further explanation or had not been adequately addressed.

The Central Corridor Coordinating Committee recommended a 45-day public review process and set three public hearings. At the insistence of a number of community organizations, the Ramsey County Regional Rail Authority later added a fourth public hearing. The groups believed that the times, dates and locations of the hearings did not give neighborhood residents and business owners an opportunity to speak. The groups also requested that the 45-day period be extended to at least 60 days in order to give citizens a chance to read and study the approximately 350 page DEIS. However, the majority of the members of the Central Corridor Coordinating Committee and the Regional Rail Authority voted to keep the review period at 45 days in order to meet the Metropolitan Council's time frame.

Public Hearings Held

More than 570 people attended the four public hearings and 180 rose to the microphones to comment on the DEIS. Many of those who spoke either repeated their comments at more than one of the hearings or repeated prepared statements from organizations such as the University of Minnesota and St. Joseph's Hospital. A majority spoke in favor of light rail transit, generally agreeing that LRT was the best transit option and that it would create opportunities to re-develop the Avenue. Very few people spoke in total opposition without providing detail to support their position. As a whole, residents and small businesses in the corridor did a very good job of expressing their concerns and

identifying issues that should be dealt with before anything happens.

The issues raised included

- impacts on existing businesses that must stay open and try to remain competitive during and after a long construction phase
- reduction or loss of bus service
- location and number of stations
- loss of business and residential parking
- LRT riders parking in neighborhoods
- increased property taxes
- cost of the project
- gentrification along the corridor
- dividing existing neighborhoods
- history and impacts of I-94 on the Rondo community.

Commissioner Janice Rettman, a strong supporter of full disclosure and active public participation in an open process, was pleased with the number of people who spoke and the quality of their testimony. "I read letters and e-mails and listened to every single person that wanted to comment and it was clear that they had spent a lot of time reading the DEIS or educating themselves through whatever sources were available. They raised a number of concerns that were not addressed or only lightly discussed that I think we must deal with in the preliminary engineering process. This project cannot go to the construction phase without dealing with the issues that the community raised."

All comments received on the DEIS have been transcribed or copied into a single 1370-page document which has been forwarded to the FTA as a part of the DEIS. These comments and the DEIS will be reviewed by FTA staff before any recommendation is made on the next step. It is possible that local officials will be asked to specifically address some of the issues raised by the public before they take any action, but some the issues can be dealt with during the preliminary engineering process.

Cities and County Comment

Both St. Paul and Minneapolis supported LRT along University Avenue and both raised issues with the DEIS for further discussion. In addition, St. Paul will continue to work on putting together a development plan for the corridor that could include re-zoning some properties, setting building and land use standards as well as recommending strategies to deal with such issues as parking, affordable housing and gentrification. To that end, St. Paul Mayor Chris Coleman has appointed a task force and committed staff to assist in developing the plan. For further information go to www.ci.stpaul.mn.us/initiatives/centralcorridor/.

Ramsey County, acting as the Regional Rail Authority, also submitted comments to the DEIS identifying some of the same issues raised by the public in very general terms. In addition, **Commissioner Janice Rettman** added 13 pages of specific issues that need to be addressed which were also adopted as a part of the Rail Authority's action. While all Commissioners were encouraged to submit comments, issues or questions, Rettman was the only one to do so. The Commissioner also submitted a 35 page compilation of comments from community residents, business owners and other interested individuals she had received over the course of the previous 18 months. These were included in the DEIS public comments.

Preliminary Engineering

Once the Federal Transit Administration has reviewed the public comments, the next step will be the preliminary engineering stage. During this process staff and consultants will design the system, determine station locations, identify specific problems such as utility locations and determine ways to address them. In addition, they should address many of the issues raised by the public, and, hopefully, identify options for the community to discuss and work toward consensus.

FTA approval to begin preliminary engineering is expected by the end of this year and the Metropolitan Council will become the lead agency throughout that phase. At this point no public process has been formally established but Hennepin County, Ramsey County, Minneapolis and St. Paul have all stated that community participation is a must. The level of involvement and the level of power that citizen participants will have has also not yet been determined.

Finally, both the construction and the long-term operation funding issues have not been resolved. The counties and the Met Council must negotiate agreements or risk losing state funding for engineering or other support.

Citizens can stay tuned and stay involved by checking the Central Corridor pages on the St. Paul and the Ramsey County websites or Commissioner Rettman's page at www.co.ramsey.mn.us

METH ORDINANCE UNDER DISCUSSION

On June 12 the Ramsey County Board of Commissioners opened discussion on a new ordinance dealing with the manufacture and cleanup of meth labs. Unlike municipalities and rural counties, Ramsey County has very few ordinances and most of them deal with county operations such as bond issues or land transfers. The regulatory ordinances generally deal with public health and welfare issues.

Methamphetamine is a highly addictive drug that uses pseudoephedrine, a common cold and sinus remedy, as its base. The biggest issue of concern for the county is the chemicals used to process the drug. Many, such as acetone, are highly toxic and highly volatile in their own right. The process of mixing them and adding heat and flame can make them deadly. In addition, the chemicals leave odors and residue in homes

that cannot be removed from walls and carpeting making houses virtually useless without a major rehabilitation.

Unfortunately, law enforcement personnel often find children living in conditions that are extremely dangerous from a safety standpoint, a health standpoint and a personal welfare standpoint. Unfortunately, and because of the addictive properties of meth, these children often suffer from severe neglect and must be removed from the family and placed in foster homes for their own safety and welfare. Police report that it is not unusual for older children to have the responsibility of caring for younger children.

The proposed ordinance outlines areas of responsibility for the County and each of the local jurisdictions. Ramsey County has 19 separate local governments many of which have their own laws with nuances that differ from their neighbors. Many also have separate police forces of their own or are under contract with other police departments thus making responses slightly different.

At the request of Commissioner Janice Rettman, lakes and waterways were added to the ordinance because it has been a common practice in some parts of the state to “cook” meth in ice fishing houses and then dump the waste into the lake. Patrolling is one issue but it is minor compared to identifying who is responsible for the very expensive environmental cleanups.

County staff will soon be meeting with as many of the 19 cities as possible for their comments on the ordinance and to work out some of the jurisdictional issues. A report should be ready for the Board to act on the ordinance by the end of July.

VOLUNTEERS NEEDED

For information on openings call 651-266-8014 or check the website at www.co.ramsey.mn.us/cb/ma/volunteer.htm

COMMUNITY COUNCIL UPDATES

District 5 (651-774-5234)

Neighborhood Action Committee
3rd Tuesday, 6:30 p.m.
Board of Directors
Every 4th Tuesday, 7:00 p.m.
Both @ Arlington Library

District 6 (651-488-4485)

Board of Directors
1st Monday
Land Use Task Force
4th Tuesday (temporarily)

District 7 (651-298-5068)

Board of Directors Meeting
2nd Tuesday, 6:30 p.m.
689 N. Dale Street

District 8 (651-228-1855)

Board of Directors
4th Tuesday, 7:00 p.m.
Hallie Q. Brown Center

District 10 (651-644-3889)

Board of Directors
3rd Tuesday, 7:00 p.m. (location varies)

District 11 (651-646-1986)

Board Meeting
3rd Tuesday, 6:30 p.m.
1564 Lafond Avenue

Lexington-Hamline (651-644-3207)

Last Monday of each month, 7:00 p.m.
@ Dunning Recreation Center

Snelling-Hamline (651-644-1085)

Board of Directors Meeting
First Thursday of each month, 7:00 p.m.

City of Falcon Heights (651-792-7600)

City Council
2nd and 4th Wednesdays, 7:00 p.m.
Falcon Heights City Hall