

SAINT CLOUD AREA PLANNING ORGANIZATION POLICY BOARD
Thursday, September 10, 2020 – 4:30 p.m.

A regular meeting of the Saint Cloud Area Planning Organization Policy Board was held on Thursday, September 10th at 4:30 p.m. APO Chair Rick Miller presided with the following members participating via the Zoom app or telephone access:

Mayor Rick Miller	Waite Park
Council Member Paul Brandmire	Saint Cloud
Mayor Dave Kleis	Saint Cloud
Council Member Dottie Seamans	Sauk Rapids
Mayor Rick Shultz	Saint Joseph
Commissioner Raeanne Danielowski	Sherburne County
Ryan Daniel, CEO	Metro Bus
Tim Elness	Sartell Council Member (alternate for Ryan Fitzthum)
Tarryl Clark	Stearns County (alternate for Joe Perske)
Dan Wogamott	MN House Representative
Anne Buckvold	Saint Joseph
Frank Loetterle, Project Manager	MnDOT
Mary McFarland	MnDOT
Andrew Andrusko	MnDOT
Erik Rudeen	MnDOT
Anthony Herbert	Metro Bus
Brian Gibson, Exec Director	Saint Cloud APO
Amber Blattner	Saint Cloud APO
Vicki Johnson	Saint Cloud APO
Alex McKenzie	Saint Cloud APO
Fred Sandal	Saint Cloud APO

INTRODUCTIONS/ ROLL CALL: Introductions were made and roll call was taken

APPROVAL OF AGENDA:

Mr. Klies motioned to approve the agenda, and Mr. Brandmire seconded the motion. Motion carried. Roll Call Vote: Miller-yes; Danielowski-yes; Daniel-yes; Brandmire-yes; Schultz – yes; Kleis-yes; Seamans-yes; Elness – yes; Clark – yes).

PUBLIC COMMENT PERIOD: No members of the public were in attendance.

CONSIDERATION OF CONSENT AGENDA ITEMS:

- Approve Minutes of August 13, 2020 Policy Board Meeting (Attachment A)
- Approve Actual Bills Lists for August and Estimated Bills List for September and October (Attachments B1 – B2)
- Approve Contract for Mississippi River Bridge Planning Update (Attachment C)

Mr. Brandmire motioned to approve the agenda, and Ms. Seamans seconded the motion. Motion carried. Roll Call Vote: Miller-yes; Danielowski-yes; Daniel-yes; Brandmire-yes; Schultz – yes; Kleis-yes; Seamans-yes; Elness – yes; Clark – yes).

Presentation on Northstar Rail Extension Feasibility Assessment (Attachment D1 & D2)
Mr. Loetterle, MnDOT Project Manager, stated the purpose of this presentation was to review the Northstar Commuter Rail Extension Feasibility Assessment and to respond to any questions the Policy Board may have. MnDOT then put together a project management team including MnDOT and Metropolitan Council staff. He noted that Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway (BNSF) indicated their willingness to continue discussing providing passenger train service provided that they could do so without effecting their current freight traffic. The project team had to identify the factors/constraints that affect how passenger trains could be operated between Minneapolis and St. Cloud and develop a range of alternatives that could feasibly be implemented with the existing Northstar service. Mr. Loetterle stated that three of the scenarios would add trains or extend trains between Big Lake and Minneapolis and would therefore not effect the existing Northstar service. The project team made sure to look at not only number of BNSF trains that used the tracks but the type of trains as well. It is important to understand that while some of BNSFs trains may have a little leeway in terms of when they get to their destination, there are several trains that operate on a schedule. BNSF also provided the project team with their existing track and signal infrastructure which Mr. Loetterle and the project team added to their computer model. The project team made sure to look at regulations related to passenger train crew utilization (hours of service, a train crew can only work for so many hours) and Labor Union Contact rules. For example, one of the reasons why they could not store any trains overnight in St. Cloud is because if a train crew signs on in St. Cloud they have to drive from Willmar instead of Northtown. That is not the only reason they did not start trains in St. Cloud but that is one example of a detail that had to be brought into consideration.

Mr. Loetterle said after going to the stakeholder and public meeting listening sessions back in November and January, it was clear that the St. Cloud residents wanted more than one in-bound train in the morning, so the project team added a more robust schedule. They sat down with BNSF and Metro Transit to develop an operations model. The four alternatives they looked at were:

1. Minimum Service Alternative – One morning peak-period train from St. Cloud to Minneapolis. One afternoon peak-period train from Minneapolis to St. Cloud.
2. Minimum Bi-Directional Service Alternative – The Minimum Bi-Directional Service Alternative provides a trip in each direction between Minneapolis and St. Cloud for both the morning and afternoon peak period.
3. Express Service Alternative – The Express Service Alternative would provide one train in each direction during both the morning and afternoon peak periods. These trains would bypass all intermediate stations to reduce travel time. (One hour and five minutes versus one hour and twenty minutes).
4. Bi-Directional Service Alternative - The Bi-Directional Service Alternative would provide the greatest amount of service of the four alternatives studied and would give St. Cloud residents more opportunities to return home. In the morning two existing Northstar trains would be rescheduled to begin in St. Cloud rather than Big Lake and one new Northstar train would be scheduled to begin at Minneapolis and travel to St. Cloud. In the afternoon three Northstar trains would operate from Minneapolis to St. Cloud and two new Northstar trains would operate from St. Cloud to Minneapolis. The project team also added one North bound trip in the late evening.

Mr. Loetterle noted that none of these trains have midday service. BNSF said no to midday service because that is when they maintain their tracks. In the winter time it is not light out in the evening, so they need to do their track inspections midday. The assessment included two Express service trains in each direction between St. Cloud and Minneapolis on Saturdays, Sundays, holidays in addition to the current service offered on weekends and holidays. Adding the weekends was not as expensive as you may think because we would already have the crews dedicated and the equipment.

Mr. Loetterle gave a summary of capital improvements necessary to run train service reliably and on schedule and without negatively affecting current freight train service. The assessment did not identify who is responsible for these capital improvements. Mr. Loetterle stated he wanted to be clear if they start talking about who would pay for what then it would move into negotiations with BNSF and they have not done that yet. Currently they are trying not to influence or effect any decisions.

Mr. Loetterle asked if there are any questions. Ms. Danielowski asked for clarification on if they are running an independent train separate from what is currently running between Big Lake and Target Field? Mr. Loetterle explained that for three of the alternatives the trains would be Northstar trains as currently branded. This express service would be a train that would not stop at any intermediate stations and could be branded separately as the "St. Cloud Express" train or something similar, but they did not assume that in the assessment. Ms. Danielowski asked if there would still be a bus service if the Northstar timeline did not work. Mr. Loetterle explained they didn't examine the possibility of bus service other than to say that for Bi-Directional Service Alternative they did assume one midday bus from St. Cloud to Minneapolis for someone who may need an opportunity to get home midday. Mr. Daniel said that MetroBus has a midday bus that only operates midday only on Fridays. It would not be that hard to get a schedule that operates five days a week. Mr. Daniel clarified that the bus stops at every train station and is not an express bus. Ms. Buckvold asked if these services are in addition to the current service or a new schedule entirely. Mr. Loetterle explained that the assessment integrates the new trains into the existing service and they held the current schedule constant.

Mr. Loetterle explained that the next step is to take these schedules and try to do some demand studies.

Mr. Loetterle asked if there are there questions about the nature of improvements. Ms. Buckvold asked if he had a ballpark total figure. Mr. Loetterle explained capital cost estimates. Projected capital costs range from \$36 million to \$188 million for initial operation. The project team used 2025 dollars, because it will probably take than long for the trains to start running, and 2040 dollars for the long-term improvements. As BNSF freight train traffic rises, additional improvements will be needed, and total projected capital costs through year 2040 range from \$139 million to \$257 million. Mr. Loetterle said that this is the starting point for discussions with BNSF. Ms. Seamans asked if \$36 million is a subset of the \$139 million. Mr. Loetterle responded affirmatively. Mr. Loetterle explained the operating cost for Northstar today is \$22 million per year and Metro Transit expects that to increase from \$26.4 to \$36.5 million in 2025. Operating & Maintenance costs do not include BNSF access fees or expensed maintenance costs for capital improvements. Mr. Loetterle mentioned he will create a pdf of the slides from this presentation and send to Mr. Gibson and Ms. Johnson to mail out to this group. Mr. Loetterle explains there are things that must be done to get to a decision to proceed and things that then have to be done to get to operation. The next thing that needs to be done is ridership and

revenue forecasting. The challenge for Mr. Loetterle is that somebody needs to pick up the ball and continue where he left off. There needs to be a public involvement process, decisions need to be made about who is responsible for doing this. Is it MetroTransit, is it MnDOT, is it some combination of the local governments along the line, etc. We would need to figure out where to get the equipment from. Someone needs to sit down and negotiate with BNSF regarding capital, operating, and access costs. Once we get through that process, we would need to complete preliminary engineering and environmental review, that would take 18- 24 months. Then we would need to complete the of final design, construction, and commissioning, that would take 36-48 months. If you did the minimum service alternative this would take a lot less time.

Ms. Clark asked if Mr. Loetterle can clarify bonding versus general fund. Her recollection from when she was working on this project is that the bulk would be bondable. Mr. Loetterale said preliminary engineering, environmental review, final design and construction, commissioning is all bondable, equipment is bondable. Ms. Buckvold asked which bodies would be best suited to negotiate with BNSF. Mr. Loetterale chose not to comment.

Mr. Miller requested paper copies of this presentation be sent to the Board members. Mr. Gibson confirmed he will send paper copies to the board members. Ms. Buckvold asked if Covid will affect any of this report. Mr. Loetterale said the analysis of train operation that they did on freight train movements was pre-pandemic. Ms. Buckvold asked about Amtrak and getting inner city rail in the state, if we move forward with this, how would that effect the ability to get Amtrak service in the state on Minnesota. Mr. Loetterle said the impact of this on Amtrak is only between Minneapolis and St. Cloud. Amtrak service from Chicago to Minneapolis would not be affected. Mr. Loetterle has not talked to Amtrak about service from Minneapolis to St. Cloud and he does not know where we would be with that. Mr. Miller asked if there is anything else. Mr. Gibson noted that staff is wondering is if there is a consensus to move forward with any of these alternatives as a region and what actions the Board may want the APO staff to take. Mr. Gibson said he is not expecting an answer today but at some point soon we will bring this back to the Board and get clarity on our next steps as the APO. Mr. Miller asks if there are any other questions.

OTHER BUSINESS & ANNOUNCEMENTS:

Mr. Gibson noted many Board members seem to prefer the ability to meet by electronic means. State law does permit it as long as certain conditions are met. He will do more research on participating electronically to see if it can continue past the emergency declaration.

ADJOURNMENT:

The meeting was adjourned at 5:22 p.m.