

Critical History of Transit Planning and Decisionmaking

This historical narrative describes briefly the events that unfolded in each of three decision-making periods. Early studies in the Twin Cities region proposed highway improvements. The transit planning effort began in 1967, with a legislative initiative leading to the decision to study transit. The decision on system selection is still under debate.

EARLY STUDIES

The first significant metropolitan transportation planning effort, the Twin Cities Area Transportation Study (TCATS), began in 1958 under the direction of the Minnesota Highway Department. Although the Metropolitan Planning Commission was in existence before TCATS began, no formal communication or decisionmaking liaison was established by the Minnesota Highway Department. Therefore, the TCATS effort focused almost exclusively on the highway network in the metropolitan area. However, it should be noted that at this time no funds were available from the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads to study transit. Many of the existing freeways in the area were products of the TCATS work.

In 1962, the Joint Program was established. Participants were the Metropolitan Planning Commission, the Minnesota Highway Department, and other planning and governmental bodies in the region. From 1962 until 1967 the Joint Program was designated the 3-C transportation planning agency. It undertook a major transportation and land use study in the metropolitan area and published a series of four principal reports that made significant early contributions in formulating the concepts of the region's land use and development plan.

DECISION TO STUDY TRANSIT

In mid-1967 the Minnesota State Legislature created the Metropolitan Council to replace the Metropolitan Planning Commission as the regional

governmental body. The Metropolitan Council was later designated the A-95 coordinating agency.

In 1969 the Metropolitan Council organized an advisory group called the Transportation Planning Program (TPP) to facilitate the coordinated, comprehensive, and continuous planning of transportation programs. The TPP was formulated through interagency agreements between the agencies responsible for transportation improvements and was composed of three committees—the Management, Policy Advisory, and Technical Advisory committees. Although the TPP was criticized for its lack of effectiveness, it provided a valuable forum for the exchange of ideas, issues, and technical information. The new Transportation Advisory Board created by the Metropolitan Council pursuant to the Metropolitan Reorganization Act of 1974 has replaced the TPP.

A few days earlier in the same legislative session, the Metropolitan Transit Commission was also established. One of its first actions was to hire the consulting firm of Simpson and Curtin to prepare a report on improvements for the bus system in the seven-county area. One result of this study was the purchase of the Twin City Lines bus company in September 1970 and the present management by contract with the American Transit Enterprises Management Services (ATE).

DECISION ON SYSTEM SELECTION

The Commission's series of long-range planning efforts began in 1968-69 with a long-range transit planning study performed by Alan M. Voorhees, Inc.⁶ The Voorhees study made an inventory of some 96 "new concept" vehicle systems and concluded that any new system should evolve from conventional system improvements. Upon completion of the initial phase of the study, a joint

⁶ Phase n-Development of Long Range Transit Improvement Program for the Twin Cities Area (1969-70).

Metropolitan Transit Commission—Metropolitan Council staff report was prepared to set forth the major components of the long-range metropolitan transit planning program for 1970 -71.7

One of the important conclusions of that joint staff statement was the recognition that transit planning should proceed on the basis of a “family of vehicles” concept. The system was to consist of (1) rapid transit operating on exclusive rights-of-way as the backbone of the system to provide trunk service between selected major centers; (2) express buses operating in mixed traffic in less congested corridors; (3) local and feeder bus service to provide a direct service to centers as well as to complement trunk lines in low-density areas; and (4) passenger distribution service within certain major centers. Subsequently the Commission and the Metropolitan Council selected a transit planning consultant to develop a study design for the remaining long-range transit planning and preliminary engineering activities.

on May 26, 1970, the Metropolitan Council approved the Commission planning grant application of \$412,670 for Phase III-A-1, as a follow up to the Voorhees study to examine and refine the conceptual plan.

The two agencies continued to work together in developing and approving the transportation section of the *Metropolitan Department Guide* of February 25, 1971. The findings of the III-A-1 studies provided the basis for the document *Transit in Transportation*, which the Metropolitan Council subsequently approved in 1971 to be used as a part of the basis for the refinement of the general transportation plan.

Late in 1970 the Metropolitan Council approved the request of the Metropolitan Transit Commission for a Federal grant application for preliminary engineering activities to develop performance specifications for a fixed-guideway vehicle system (Phase III-A-2). This study followed the “family of vehicles” system concept plan and was focused on refining the transit plans covering determination of route and station locations, and a schedule for implementing the plan in stages. It recommended a fixed-guideway vehicle system utilizing a 40-passenger vehicle as the first link and the backbone component of the regional system.

⁷ Februar, 25, 1970.

In 1971, the Minnesota State Legislature further defined the role of the Metropolitan Transit Commission. The Commission’s enabling legislation was amended to require its plans to be consistent with the development guide prepared by the Metropolitan Council. This was an early effort by the legislature to remedy its failure in the initial 1967 legislation to coordinate the planning authorities of the two agencies.

From the inception of the long-range transportation planning study (in 1968) until 1972, the cooperative working relationship between the Metropolitan Transit Commission and the Metropolitan Council was generally successful. The Metropolitan Transit Commission had coordinated its work with the Metropolitan Council staff and obtained the requisite approvals for each step in the multiphased process.

In the fall of 1972, conflict over transit planning authority arose between the Metropolitan Council and the Metropolitan Transit Commission. The conflict is best described in two legal opinions prepared by respected law firms—one for the Metropolitan Council and one for the Metropolitan Transit Commission. The legal opinion provided for the Metropolitan Transit Commission states:

The legislature gave to the Metropolitan Transit Commission the exclusive power to develop a plan for a complete, integrated mass transit system . . . (and) the power of acquisition of an existing transit system is modified to the extent that the Metropolitan Council must approve the acquisition before it is made. This does not diminish that power, but only conditions the exercise of that power to the extent that Council approval is necessary . . . In looking at the entire scheme of transit legislation . . . the power to plan and engineer must reside somewhere, and it is very obvious that it still resides in the Metropolitan Transit Commissions

The Metropolitan Council also solicited a legal opinion in response to the Metropolitan Transit Commission’s request for approval of the proposed Transit Development Program. The Metropolitan Council’s legal opinion states:

⁸ Legal opinion concerning power of Metropolitan Transit Commission to plan and engineer transit systems, by letter to Douglas Kelm from David S. Doty, Esquire, November 28, 1972.

In our opinion . . . the Council is the only agency which has the authority to prepare and adopt a long-term comprehensive plan on transportation and transit of the type that would be subject to the review, hearing and appeal provisions of Section 473 B.06, Sub-division 6.⁹

The present conflict grew out of a difference of opinion over the legislative mandates given the two agencies. Both assumed the authority to plan transit systems. While the Metropolitan Council focused its initial attention on sewers and public parks, the Metropolitan Transit Commission set about developing a public transit plan. When the Metropolitan Transit Commission completed and approved a Transit Development Program in 1972, based on the results of previous transit studies, it requested the Metropolitan Council, pursuant to the 1971 act, to review the Transit Development Program.

The Metropolitan Council declined to review the Commission's plan on the basis that the 1971 legislation had given the Council exclusive authority to determine long-range comprehensive transit plans. Although the Metropolitan Transit Commission renewed its request for review, the Metropolitan Council maintained its position.

The growing conflict was based not only on a rivalry over authority to plan. It also reflected a difference in the type of transit system favored. While the Transit Commission favored a fixed-guideway system, the Metropolitan Council hired Barton-Aschman Associates, Inc. in 1972 to carry out a \$15,000 study to examine the advantages of a bus approach to regional mass transit and to develop implementation strategies.¹⁰

During the same period, the potential of personal rapid transit (PRT) to meet Twin Cities transportation needs began to surface as a public issue, due in large part to energetic sponsorship of this concept by University of Minnesota Professor Edward Anderson.

At this juncture the Metropolitan Transit Commission prepared to take its case to the State legislature. During the 1973 legislative session both houses received information on proposals for

an intermediate-capacity fixed-guideway system from the Commission, a plan of exclusive busways from the Metropolitan Council, and a PRT grid network system from others. The House of Representatives approved the implementation of the Commission's plan. However, it was tabled in the Senate Urban Affairs Committee by the chairman, who regarded the Council-Commission controversy as one of metropolitan government responsibility and authority rather than a conflict between two choices of transit mode.

Then the legislature established a study Subcommittee on Mass Transit and adjourned for the summer. During the summer this subcommittee directed staff research on the mass transit controversy, held 17 hours of formal public hearings, took a 6-day trip to five western cities to evaluate transit hardware, and had numerous informal discussions with knowledgeable individuals. The result was a subcommittee report, "The Metropolitan Mass Transit Need" (November 15, 1973), which favored elements of each plan. It agreed with the Commission's extensive bus improvement program and automated fixed-guideway proposal but felt it was too expensive; it agreed with the Metropolitan Council's strategy of incrementally developing a transit system starting with immediate bus system improvements, but rejected a system solely of exclusive busways; and it agreed with the PRT service concept of on-demand, non-stop, origin-to-destination service but rejected the proposed fine-grain network that was to be exclusive PRT. Moreover the subcommittee staff concurred in the Citizens League's findings that low-cost alternatives must be part of any transit solution.

The legislature once again asserted its role as an active participant in Twin Cities transportation planning by enacting the Metropolitan Reorganization Act of 1974 (MRA)¹¹ along with several pieces of legislation dealing with low-cost transportation alternatives (carpools and employer vans, a bus service expansion program, and a small-vehicle fixed-guideway study).¹²

The latter piece of legislation directed the Metropolitan Transit Commission to plan an automated small-vehicle fixed-guideway system within the metropolitan transit taxing district. The

⁹Letter to Albert J. Hofstede, Chairman of the Metropolitan Council from Thomas S. Hay, Esquire, January 25, 1973.

¹⁰"Feasibility of a Low Risk, Incremental Investment Strategy for the Twin Cities Regional Transit System" Metropolitan Council, 1973.

¹¹Minnesota Session Laws, 1974, Chapter 422.

¹²S.F.No. 2703.

Metropolitan Council was to cooperate with the Metropolitan Transit Commission and to provide general policy guidance in developing the plan. The study was to be completed by January 1, 1975, and reported to the legislature with Commission recommendations as well as to the Metropolitan Council for its review. Based on the plans developed in this study, the Metropolitan Council was to prepare a final report for the legislature before February 1, 1975, setting forth its findings and recommendations based upon the *Metropolitan Development Guide*.

In accordance with the 1974 MRA legislation, the Metropolitan Transit Commission worked with the Metropolitan Council and its staff members in preparing a study design for Metropolitan Council approval. In order to refine the general directives set forth by the legislature, the Commission convened a study design conference to define key issues to be addressed in the study and to update information on the state-of-the-art in each of a dozen or more issue areas. The conference participants included PRT system advocates, representatives of transportation operating agencies, system planning experts, and manufacturers.

The resulting study design carefully specified the considerations to be studied. The consultant was to analyze and evaluate several alternative small-vehicle fixed-guideway systems and then compare these systems with the current Commission plan.

The Minnesota Legislature provided \$300,000 to finance the small-vehicle study. The Metropolitan Transit Commission sought an additional \$100,000 from the Urban Mass Transportation Administration to assist in the effort. On August 6, 1974, the Urban Mass Transportation Administration reallocated

\$127,200 of its technical studies funds to satisfy the Commission's request.

The work began in August 1974, directed and closely supervised by a management committee composed of three representatives from the Metropolitan Council and three from the Metropolitan Transit Commission. A consultant team of DeLeuw, Cather with the support of two local firms took major responsibility for the study, reporting to the management committee. The consultants' final report was a technical report prepared for the Metropolitan Transit Commission showing the required comparison of several types of personal and group rapid transit systems with the Commission's Phase III-A-2 recommended 40-passenger vehicle.

The Commission and the Council drew conflicting findings and recommendations from the small-vehicle study. The Commission found that the optimum system would be one based on a 16-seat vehicle. It recommended implementing a fixed-guideway system of some sort other than conventional large rail transit to serve as the basic element of a transit system. In addition, the Commission recommended against a PRT concept for regional service and suggested that a final systems analysis include light rail transit as a possible alternative to the more heavily automated concepts.

The Metropolitan Council took the more extreme position against any automated fixed-guideway rapid transit for a regional system; instead the Council continues to support a regional bus transit system as the best solution,

Thus, as yet no decision has been made on a long-range public transit plan. Nevertheless, agreement has been reached to concentrate on making short-term improvements in the bus transit system.