



Minnesota Department of Transportation

Transportation Building

395 John Ireland Blvd.
Saint Paul, Minnesota 55155-1899

August 10, 2007

Governor Tim Pawlenty
State of Minnesota
130 State Capitol Building
St. Paul, MN 55155

Governor Pawlenty:

At your direction, we have completed our preliminary assessment of the potential for reconstructing the I-35 bridge in a manner that could incorporate a light rail line. For the reasons that follow, we have concluded that the inherent disadvantages of including LRT do not justify the expense and delays that would result from further study.

Impact on I-35 Bridge Reconstruction

Timing Implications: Including LRT in the I-35W bridge would cause unacceptable delays in the design and construction of the bridge. First, significant study would be required to determine the best LRT alignment and approaches to the bridge. In the best case, this work would take at least 6 weeks to complete. Even then, as discussed below, up to two years of additional review would be required to finally determine whether an I-35W alignment is even feasible as compared to the Washington Avenue alignment, and the feasibility looks extremely doubtful. Accordingly, delaying the I-35W bridge reconstruction in order to accommodate further consideration of an LRT component would be imprudent because of the severe economic and transportation consequences of losing that critical interstate river crossing.

Cost implications: In addition to timing considerations, we also reviewed potential cost implications. MnDOT believes that it would be less expensive to reinforce or rebuild the Washington Avenue bridge, or build a stand-alone LRT river crossing, than to add an LRT component to the I-35W bridge. Moreover, in our discussions with the FWHA, it has become quite clear that the federal funds and environmental waivers that have been granted for the I-35W project are contingent on the new bridge being substantially similar to the bridge being replaced. Adding a rail component would trigger new air quality and other environmental reviews, adding additional costs and delays to the project. Moreover, the incremental design and construction costs associated with the rail component would not be eligible for the federal emergency funds that have been authorized for the bridge.

Impact on Central Corridor LRT Project

Assessing the I-35W bridge corridor as a potential new alignment for the Central Corridor LRT project would also cause significant costs and delays to the rail project. At

the very least, the Central Corridor project would need to complete the following tasks *before the feasibility* of an I-35W alignment could be determined:

- Identify a new alignment and approaches to both ends of the new I-35W bridge.
- Identify at least two new station locations on the new alignment.
- Prepare a supplemental draft environmental impact statement or possibly a new environmental impact statement (requires at least 4 months to one year).
- Estimate associated project impacts related to the new I-35W Central Corridor alignment, including ridership, travel time, and construction cost impacts
- Recalculate the Central Corridor Cost Effective Index (CEI) resulting from the new I-35W Central Corridor alignment.

In order to qualify for federal funding, LRT projects must meet prescribed CEI thresholds. The CEI reflects a project's ridership, travel time, and cost.

We know that the I-35 alignment would add approximately one-half mile to the project, increasing travel time and probably costs. Moving the alignment from Washington Avenue to I-35 via a 4th Street or University Avenue alignment through the University of Minnesota would also affect ridership. Significant West Bank and East Bank boardings would be lost. Those losses would be somewhat offset by new boardings at stations along University Avenue, but the overall impact on ridership of this realignment would likely be negative. While it is impossible to ascertain the precise impact on the CEI at this point, the above factors taken together would most likely have a negative impact on the Central Corridor CEI. Moreover, the Central Corridor Coordinating Committee rejected a similar East Bank 4th/University Avenue alignment in 2001.

Even if the results of the above analysis supported going forward, and assuming the project partners concurred (Metropolitan Council, MnDOT, Ramsey County, Hennepin County, Minneapolis, St. Paul, University of Minnesota) the next level of analysis could take an additional one to two years. This effort would include:

- Developing the I-35 Central Corridor alignment to the 30% conceptual level of design
- Evaluation of environmental issues
- Public and agency involvement efforts
- Coordination with Federal Transit Administration

Other Considerations:

The current plan for the new I-35W bridge includes the potential for a dedicated transit/HOV lane in each direction. Adding LRT to the bridge would likely eliminate that possibility. The need for dedicated transit/HOV lanes on the I-35 bridge is much more immediate and certain than the need for LRT capacity. Accordingly, sacrificing transit/HOV capacity for a potential LRT line is inadvisable.

Finally, it is worth noting that the Washington Avenue bridge has already been identified as the preferred alignment for the Central Corridor LRT line, and the structural integrity of that bridge is currently under review. If the integrity of that bridge becomes an issue, it will likely need to be addressed regardless of LRT. So moving the Central Corridor

alignment from Washington Ave to I-35W wouldn't necessarily solve the Washington Avenue bridge problems, but would most certainly trigger considerable delays and costs for both the I-35W bridge and Central Corridor LRT projects.

Conclusion:

The I-35W bridge has been described as the region's lifeline into Minneapolis. The loss of the bridge has forced 141,000 trips per day onto alternative routes. Clearly, it is in the public interest to rebuild the bridge as safely, efficiently, and quickly as possible.

Delaying reconstruction for up to two years to further study a possible LRT component – when the feasibility of such a component is inherently doubtful - simply cannot be justified. Accordingly, it is our recommendation that no further consideration be given to including an LRT component in the I-35W bridge.

Sincerely,



Carol Molnau
Lt. Governor, State of Minnesota
Council



Peter Bell
Chair, Metropolitan