

Equity missing from new SWLRT plans

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Commentary by Michael McDowell, transit organizer, Neighborhoods Organizing for Change

Last week Neighborhoods Organizing for Change (NOC) was glad to see a plan moving forward to build the Southwest Light Rail Transit (SWLRT), but deeply disappointed in the lack of equity in the plan as it currently exists.

The current SWLRT includes no mention of equity, and it remains unclear how this project will benefit the Northside communities it's running through.

NOC, along with the People's Transit Coalition, put together a community benefits agreement that was crafted by engaging the community around what they want out of this \$1.6 billion project coming through their neighborhood. This document was crafted with the needs and wants of community at the center, including a clear call for better shelters and other amenities in north Minneapolis and reduction in fare.

The current SWLRT plan has committed to 24 new shelters in north Minneapolis this year, as part of a total of 75 to 100 new shelters by end of 2015. This moves them from meeting 54 percent of the need – by their own definitions – to about 74 percent in Racially Concentrated Areas of Poverty (RCAP). There was no mention of how many of these shelters were already planned in advance of the current proposal, nor any mention of how to cover 100 percent of stops that meet the RCAP threshold.

As the transit organizer with NOC, I ride the bus every day asking people what they want to see from such a huge investment in the transit system they use daily. Transit riders expressed clearly that the lack of amenities was an issue especially in areas such as north Minneapolis. North Minneapolis has far fewer amenities such as shelters, lighting and heat than any other part of the city. Riders also expressed a clear need for reduction in fare. We want to take pride in riding the bus and public transportation. With a multi-billion dollar transit investment in our neighborhoods, the Met Council must consider the needs of people who rely on transit daily in deciding where and how to invest.

As the light rail comes through neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty, residents of

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those neighborhoods deserve to be connected to it. In addition to the lack of a clear investment strategy in these communities, this current plan will exacerbate concerns about the likelihood of gentrification and residents being priced out of their neighborhoods as the light rail comes in. The People's Transit Coalition's drafted community benefits agreement listed clear demands around investment in affordable housing and local businesses in north Minneapolis to prevent pricing residents out of the neighborhood. We need a much greater commitment from Met Council and the city around these demands.

"The Southwest Light Rail must be tied to reducing racial and economic disparities in north Minneapolis," said NOC executive director, Anthony Newby. "We look forward to continue engaging with the city of Minneapolis and the Met Council to make this a reality, but they need to know that the current plans fall far short of our expectations."