

HENNEPIN COUNTY

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Commissioner Irene Fernando's Remarks 8/24/2021 Subcommittee on Housing, Transportation, and Community Development

Thank you Chair Smith, Ranking Member Rounds, and Members of the Committee:

I extend my sincere gratitude for the opportunity to speak and for all the work you do.

My name is Irene Fernando, Hennepin County Commissioner and Chair of our Regional Railroad Authority. And as a commissioner, I am dedicated to advancing equity by advocating for those who are marginalized or structurally disenfranchised.

I am proud to represent District 2, which includes Golden Valley, Medicine Lake, Minneapolis, Plymouth, and St. Anthony Village. I am in my first term in office; I am the youngest woman to serve on Hennepin's board; and alongside Commissioner Angela Conley, we are the first and only commissioners of color in Hennepin's 169-year history.

HISTORY

Since the 1970s, the Twin Cities 7-county region has envisioned and pursued a regional light rail transit system. Over the years, light rail meaningfully complemented buses to create high-quality transit connections for residents and visitors. This work occurs in partnership with community and all levels of government, with the Metropolitan Council as our regional planning organization leading to implement these important projects.

During the 1990s, Hennepin County steadily increased our commitment to affordable housing and economic development. This work enhanced light rail projects through Hennepin's Community Works program, which tailored housing and economic development investments to directly partner with local municipalities during major transportation and transit projects.

And through today, Hennepin continues to deepen and broaden our commitment to these areas by approving record investments to increase affordable housing and access to homeownership, to promote more transit oriented development, as well as to support entrepreneurs and grow small businesses.

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In partnership with the Metropolitan Council, other counties, and the State, the Twin Cities 7-county region has achieved a multi-modal transit system to address the various needs of our residents. From light rail transit and arterial bus rapid transit to ensure fast and frequent connections, to local service for denser communities, to bus rapid transit that connects across urban and suburban areas, to Metro Mobility which offers public transit for riders with needs due to a disability or health conditions—we are proud of this multi-agency commitment to delivering high-quality transportation system that connects residents and visitors to our entire region.

Still with all of this progress, it is clear that there is much more to do to advance a regional and multi-modal transit system that meets the needs of our diverse communities, by incorporating equity and environmental justice into the *design, construction, and operating* of transit projects.

- *Design* can occur more equitably when we center additional transit users. Historically, our system too heavily prioritized suburban commuters coming in and out of downtown, as well as riders who are able to choose transit. Given the shifts in work locations and patterns, as well as a growing chasm in household income levels, equitable design requires deeper commitment to workers and families—so that night-shift health care workers can travel safely, elderly can ride confidently, and a mother with grocery bags and a toddler can efficiently get home.
- *Construction* can occur more equitably when we establish even more aggressive diversity and inclusion benchmarks for contractors and subcontractors, as well as position organizations and workers for success with these expectations. We need to be data-informed and diligent in ensuring true living wages, and we must partner with existing organizations who have already been training local residents to learn these important trades.
- And *operating* can occur more equitably when we meet residents’ needs with a restorative response. We know that many transit riders may also benefit from human services offered by counties, so intentional partnership between transit operators and counties can work to improve conditions for everyone.

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We are hopeful for how transit can transform lives through projects like Southwest Light Rail Extension, Gold Line Bus Rapid Transit, and Arterial Bus Rapid Transit improvements like the B, E, and F lines. And we are grateful and energized for the opportunity to partner to rise to meet the challenges in our communities.

Specifically, the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act can serve Minnesotans by expanding transit service to underserved communities across the metro, making system upgrades and repairs to aging infrastructure, as well as improving air quality by expediting the transition to electric buses. It will also bring numerous construction jobs into the region, which we will benefit the stability of their households and communities.

BLUE LINE EXTENSION

Today, I am excited to talk about a project that will make an incredible difference locally, with potential benefits across the country. The Blue Line Extension, which has been in the works for over 30 years, is a 13-mile light rail project that will further our region's transit vision, and will affordably connect students to education, workers to jobs, patients to health care, and families to resources. It will bring transformational benefits to residents of the corridor, connecting Brooklyn Park, through Crystal, Robbinsdale, North Minneapolis to downtown Minneapolis.

We are deeply committed to the Blue Line Extension because it is more than a project to advance—it is a commitment to the residents and communities along the corridor for ongoing engagement and economic investment for years and decades to come.

The project was in a holding pattern for a number of years due to the original alignment's colocation with the freight rail. After numerous strategies to resolve this, it became clear that delivering high-quality transit connections to our residents, in a timely manner, must be the priority.

So about one year ago, in August of 2020, Hennepin County and Metropolitan Council jointly began the community process needed to revise the alignment, in order to move away from the colocation with the freight rail. This need to revise the alignment afforded us a unique opportunity to engage communities, during a pandemic, which resulted in insightful and alarming feedback around equity, gentrification, access to resources, disinvestment, and climate.

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THE CORRIDOR

This project is positioned to serve among the most racially and economically diverse communities in Minnesota, while also connecting transit-reliant residents to the broader regional transit system.

The Blue Line Extension will serve communities with long-standing disinvestment and disparities. This corridor has high concentrations of *Cost Burdened Households*, have felt the lasting impacts of *Historical Redlining*, experience more *COPD Hospitalizations* due to air quality, and feel the devastations of premature death as measured by *Years of Potential Life Loss* ([see our Advancing Equity along the Blue Line Extension PDF](#)).

To visualize this need, I have two maps here and several more in your materials. The first map to my right looks at concentrations of *People of Color & Transit Commuters*. As you can see, the proposed Blue Line Extension serves communities who are reliant on transit, as well as the most racially diverse communities in Hennepin.

The second map to my left looks at *Home Value & Adult High School Degrees*. This corridor shows lower home values and lower degree attainment for adults 25+. We know that property valuation connects to disinvestment, and of course, we know there is a strong relationship between education and income.

It seems regardless of the measurement, along lines of environmental justice, health outcomes, education attainment, housing stability, or economic success, these maps and data tell a consistent and compelling story:

The Blue Line Extension will change the trajectory of what's possible for so many of my neighbors today and for generations to come. It will ignite much needed and long overdue economic development for small businesses, while building wealth for working families.

For example, I live in North Minneapolis, which is 16% of the City's population at about 70,000 residents. And if I wanted to host you all tonight for a sit-down dinner—I couldn't. There aren't places for people to celebrate life milestones, nor spots for my neighborhood's kids to get their first jobs. It seems inconceivable to have this many people in an area without restaurant choices, access to jobs, or spaces to celebrate.

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Extending to suburban communities in this corridor, they demonstrated greater population growth in the 2020 Census than anticipated. The largest suburb is Brooklyn Park, where the Blue Line Extension will terminate, which grew nearly 14% between 2010 and 2020. And in the same period, Brooklyn Center grew by over 12%. With ever-increasing population densities, the suburban communities in this corridor are more ready for transit investment today than ever before.

ANTI-DISPLACEMENT

After a century of disinvestment, racial covenants, and redlining, we have a duty to ensure current residents, small businesses, and cultural institutions are both engaged in and able to benefit from the increased development in their neighborhoods.

The communities in this corridor have suffered disproportionately over the past year—due to the pandemic, the resulting job and housing disruptions, and historic harms that must be repaired.

This is why Hennepin and Met Council are proud to have established an Anti-Displacement Workgroup that centers community voices and convenes diverse partners and stakeholders, to develop robust anti-displacement measures that counter the unintended harm from large scale infrastructure projects, with specific goals to reduce racial disparities and to create more equitable economic strategies.

The Anti-Displacement Workgroup is comprised of community leaders, business owners, residents, and experts. Together, Hennepin and Met Council issued a Request for Proposals to identify a community organization who will lead this bold effort to build in creative ways to incorporate community in the design, construction, and operation of this large scale infrastructure project.

Our teams work deliberately every day to ensure the Blue Line Extension benefits corridor residents; and minimizes physical, economic, and cultural displacement.

Our anti-displacement goals closely align with the Biden-Harris Administration's Justice40 Initiative, which commits 40-percent of Federal climate investment to benefit disadvantaged

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communities. Transit is a climate investment, and in order to benefit disadvantaged communities, intentional focus on anti-displacement is required.

PARTNERSHIP & THANK YOU

We hope the committee's goals align and look forward to the possibility of partnering. We can achieve transformational benefits for our communities with Federal support, and I am confident that this work has the opportunity to be scaled to other jurisdictions due to Hennepin's size, experiences, assets, and shortcomings.

We are a mix of urban, suburban, and exurban communities, and we are adjacent to rural communities—all of whom need comprehensive transit options to access vital resources such as level 1 trauma centers, social services, veterans affairs, educational institutions, job training, and airports. Innovations that work in Hennepin can apply to counties larger and smaller, which makes this region a productive space to consider new ideas.

In partnership, we could ask questions and create replicable frameworks to center residents who have been historically marginalized, to meaningfully incorporate climate change, and to address quantifiable patterns of disinvestment through affordable housing, growing local businesses, and access to jobs.

Thank you again for the time today, and I look forward to hearing your questions or reactions. And thank you, Chair Smith.



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