

# **Themes from the April 27<sup>th</sup> & 28<sup>th</sup> Listening Sessions and Written Comments**

## **1. Safety Concerns**

Safety concerns garnered more comments than just about any other issue. Concerns expressed included the need for pedestrian crossings in several locations, the potential for derailments in general and specifically spills, explosions and fires potentially caused by derailments; concern that the potential for derailments is increased by the tight curves, steep grades and raised rail beds along the MN&S. Concern was expressed about the curves creating blind intersections, the proximity of the tracks to schools and kids; the speed of trains, fumes from idling trains, air pollution, and the threat that hazardous materials on the trains present to the schools and neighborhoods along the tracks.

### Observations:

These are all important issues that need to be addressed in the choice of routes, design of the project and provision of appropriate mitigation. Many of the safety issues are of concern no matter which route is chosen for TC&W trains. Other issues like the proximity of the tracks and the High School; or, LRT trains operating in the same corridor as freight rail are specific to one route or the other.

## **2. Train Operations**

Several comments were made regarding the steep grades, tight curves, tight ROW and elevated track bed on the MN&S route through St. Louis Park.

Others made suggestions about how to fit freight rail and LRT through the Kenilworth corridor by using single track for LRT instead of dual tracks, reducing the separation requirement between LRT and freight rail tracks.

Specifically it was asked what is the track separation requirement, recognizing that the 25 ft separation is not a federal standard?

Suspicion was raised about role the State Rail Plan has played in the proposal to route TC&W trains onto the MNS tracks. The idea was expressed that the real reason for the MN&S being proposed as the location for TC&W trains was to further the objectives of the State Rail Plan in general and the Dan Patch Commuter Rail proposal specifically. The concern was that making improvements to the MNS tracks for TC&W trains was opening the door to many more freight trains and potentially high speed passenger rail on the MNS route.

### Observations:

Regarding the characteristics of the MN&S route compared to Kenilworth, the SEH analysis generally agrees with the comments from the Listening Sessions. The MN&S

route does have more and steeper grades, tighter curves and more elevated tracks. Regarding the ROW, it varies significantly for both routes.

Regarding track separation requirements, they are largely set by the railroads themselves. The separation between tracks is needed for safety and maintenance. The speed and frequency of train traffic on adjoining tracks influences the separation needed. Indications are that a separation of 25 feet between freight rail and LRT tracks is the starting point for discussion with the railroads. A larger separation maybe needed considering the speed and frequency of the LRT trains.

Regarding use of a single LRT track instead of dual tracks within the pinch point of the Kenilworth corridor, it is a less than ideal arrangement and greatly compromises the overall design of the LRT system. This would be the only single track section of the LRT system in the Twin Cities and it is very unlikely this configuration would be acceptable. In addition to the safety concerns inherent with trains sharing a single track, it also limits the train frequency.

Regarding the State Rail Plan, the MN&S route does appear in MNDOT Comprehensive Statewide Freight and Passenger Rail Plan. However, the obstacles to greater use of the MN&S route are substantial. The existing major barriers outside of St. Louis Park make it very unlikely freight trains other than the current CP or the rerouted TC&W trains would ever come through St. Louis Park. Commuter rail has even bigger obstacles, and the track improvements being contemplated in the MN&S Study would not be adequate for high speed passenger rail.

### **3. The Wye**

Concern was expressed that the MN&S Study's plans do not replace the Oxford Avenue industrial area (Skunk Hollow) "switching wye" with a direct south bound connection from the CP tracks to the MN&S. This would mean that any TC&W train traffic that wants to go south on the MN&S would either undertake a noisy, time-consuming series of switching maneuvers on the wye tracks; or, they would need to use a new north bound interconnection to the MN&S to access the MN&S tracks and then reverse direction and head south. Concerns were expressed both for the potential noise and disruption in the neighborhoods near Skunk Hollow; and, for the additional potential train traffic in the neighborhoods along the MN&S tracks north of Hwy 7, including the High School area.

#### Observations:

TC&W trains are not currently using the MN&S tracks to travel south; and, the connection to the south is not needed to replace the Kenilworth route. However, switching in the Skunk Hollow area is a serious problem when it occurs; and, removal of the wye is one of the requirements the City identified in its July 2010 rail resolution.

### **4. Noise and Vibrations**

Concern about train noise and vibrations and there impacts on, livability, the High School activities and student learning, property values and the neighborhoods in general were raised by several participants in varied ways.

Observations:

Whistle Quiet Zones (WQZ) and new tracks will improve noise levels, however further work is needed on the vibration issues. There is conflicting information on what the level of vibration will be and information about what can be done to mitigate vibrations is needed. Vibration and noise impacts at the High School need particular additional work.

**5. Access & Traffic Concerns**

Concern was expressed about train traffic impacts on neighborhood walk-ability, closure of the 29<sup>th</sup> Street at grade crossing, trains blocking multiple intersections along the MN&S tracks at the same time. Accessibility between Central Community Center (Spanish Immersion School) and the High School was a major concern.

The issue of increased train traffic affecting bus transit routes was raised.

Observations:

Blockage of traffic, pedestrians, bicyclists, buses by trains are a major issue for both reroutes. Access to schools, parks, shopping areas, regional trails, community facilities (libraries to dog parks), transit stops and stations all deserve careful consideration. City staff and SEH are doing additional work on pedestrian circulation specifically.

**6. Property Value Concerns**

Concerns were expressed about the impact of increased train traffic on individual home values, and the neighborhoods as a whole. Fear that the train traffic would lead to decreased standard of living, decline in the quality of neighborhoods, reduced home ownership and increased rental property.

Observations:

According to the City Assessor future changes in rail routes and traffic volume may influence property values in St. Louis Park. Proximity to railroad tracks can have an affect on property values as can proximity to freeways and other external influences. Valuation professionals such as appraisers and assessors carefully review market transactions in developing adjustment factors for external influences along with many other market attributes. Speculation on short term or long term influence can vary considerably as does the market response from individual buyers and sellers. The assessing office reports that their current annual modeling of market values varies within a range of 3-12% along rail tracks, highways and other similar external influences.

**7. Mitigation**

A general belief was expressed that the mitigation proposed in the MN&S Study to date was woefully inadequate and uncreative. There was a hope that the MN&S Study process would have involved more give and take discussion about creative solutions to the negative impacts associated with increased train traffic on the MN&S route. Many mitigation ideas were suggested. Some of the key ideas suggested were creating a true rail corridor with sufficient buffering between the tracks and abutting properties, the purchase of properties close to the tracks, consideration of building a new High School

away from tracks, noise/vibration mitigation especially at the High School, a new traffic signal at Minnetonka Blvd to compensate for the closure of W 29th St, grade separated rail crossings, grade separated pedestrian crossings and replacement of impacted wetland/flood storage areas.

Concern was also expressed as to how the community can be assured that mitigation measures will actually be implemented in these tough times with tight public budgets. It was asked, what happens if the mitigation that is implemented turns out to be insufficient?

Observations:

Once the MNS EAW is published we will know more accurately exactly what mitigation is envisioned as part of the MNS proposal. Table 10 in SEH Tech Memo #4 includes a range of potential mitigation measures to consider that go beyond the measures anticipated be included in the MNS EAW. Many of the SEH ideas are similar to ideas suggested at the Listening Sessions and in written comments.

**8. Livability and general comments about impacts**

People commented that the overall effect of increased train traffic on the MN&S was a loss of livability; a loss of walk-ability, a detriment to the schools and inconsistent with the City's Vision and commitment to Children First. It was also commented that trains already traveling on the BNSF tracks are already hurting the community.

Observations:

Ultimately the objective of the analysis of the potential routes for the TC&W trains, is to discern what approach is in the overall long term best interests for St. Louis Park including consistency with the City's Vision and values. Trains travel through St. Louis Park now and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. No matter which route TC&W trains use, mitigation and other efforts will be needed to protect and enhance the livability of our community.

**9. LRT**

The importance of SWLRT and support for SWLRT was expressed by many. They saw LRT as a high priority for the community and a net plus even if train traffic had to be rerouted to the MN&S. Some felt the connection between the freight rail and LRT issue meant the projects should be considered together, others thought they should be considered as unrelated separate projects. It was pointed out that the SWLRT DEIS process provides another opportunity for the City to raise concerns about freight rail rerouting.

Observations:

The City is on record in strong support of SWLRT. The City continues to participate in the planning for its implementation. It also is clear that the routing of freight rail affects LRT and vice versa. The expectation is that the City will comment on the MNS EAW and the SWLRT DEIS.

## **10. Regional Trail**

Written comments were received regarding the importance of the regional bike trails, the increasing levels of biking, and the communities support for trails.

### Observations:

St. Louis Park has a strong tradition of support for sidewalks and trails for pedestrians and bicyclists, including regional trails. It is part of the City's Vision.

## **11. Cost of Project**

Concern was expressed that this is a waste of time and money, when other infrastructure is falling apart. A commenter noted that Kenilworth route appears to be less expensive, and therefore the best route.

### Observations:

The cost of improvements for creating a permanent route for the TC&W trains is difficult to accurately estimate at this time. It does appear that the raw basic estimate of the cost of constructing the necessary improvements and the minimum property acquisitions needed are less for the Kenilworth route than the MNS route. However, these are all very preliminary numbers; and, in the case of the Kenilworth estimates, they leave out the cost of relocating the regional trail and any additional costs incurred to overcome any problems created from freight rail at the LRT stations.