

A light at the end of the LRT project

University Ave. businesses seeking ways to survive the four years of construction

By Kevin Driscoll

The owners of the 800 businesses on University Avenue between the state Capitol and the University of Minnesota's East Bank may not know until next spring whether the Federal Transit Administration has approved the financing for the Central Corridor light-rail transit line. But if it does, construction of the line could begin as early as the spring of 2010, severely restricting customer access for extended periods.

The prospect of having the street in front of their shops torn up for months at a time during the four-year LRT construction project drew 30 small-business owners to a November 20 meeting sponsored by the fledgling University Avenue Business Association.

"I understand this is a big project and that a lot of planning is still needed," said Mike Baca, owner of Impressive Print at 1754 University Ave. "But we need to know the long-term effects of the construction so we can plan. We need everyone in the organizations connected with this to be straight with us. If they don't know something, they need to say so. I can deal with that, but I can't deal with surprises."

Virtually everyone connected with the Central Corridor project is operating on the assumption that the federal government will approve the \$915 million Central Corridor light-rail line and agree to pay half of the construction costs, according to Laura Baenan, a spokeswoman for the Central Corridor Project Office. Even so, the schedule of when and where construction will take place along the 11-mile line between the downtowns of St. Paul and Minneapolis won't be worked out until the federal funding is approved, Baenan said.

The Metropolitan Council will oversee the plan to mitigate the effects of construction on traffic along University and the rest of the Central Corridor, Baenan said. Meanwhile, the Central Corridor Partnership's 23-member Business Advisory Council (BAC) is focusing on ways to help individual businesses survive the construction period.

"The BAC is mostly made up of larger businesses, chambers of commerce and other organizations that may not have the same agenda as the smaller mom-and-pop stores on University," said Linda Winsor of University United, which founded the University Avenue Business Association. "That's why we began the business association."

Two other organizations have been established to help small businesses in the Central Corridor secure financial assistance, remain viable during construction and plan for the day when light rail is up and running: the University Avenue Business Preparation Collaborative (UABPC), an organization of several nonprofits funded by the city of St. Paul, foundations and private banks; and the Central Corridor Funders Collaborative (CCFC), an amalgamation of several foundations.

Cy Thao of the UABPC said his organization is currently assessing the needs of businesses on University between Rice Street and the St. Paul city limits and raising money to help those firms with annual revenues of \$1 million or less. "Our primary goal is to help small businesses strengthen and improve now in preparation for the construction period so they can better weather it," Thao said.

The CCFC has been studying how such cities as Seattle and Portland helped businesses survive large-scale transit construction projects, according to its spokesman, Jonathan Sage-Martinson. Portland developed a multimedia public notification system during lightrail construction, he said, and Seattle set up a \$50 million relief fund to provide grants and interest-free loans to businesses along its transit line. Any unspent money was devoted to future development projects along the Seattle transit line. Seattle also sponsored group and one-on-one meetings between small-business owners and marketing experts.

The CCFC is "also looking for funding sources for grants and low- or no-interest loans (for Central Corridor businesses)," Sage-Martinson said.

State Senator Patricia Torres Ray (DFL, District 62) said she will be seeking “Seattle-type funding for the Central Corridor” during the upcoming session of the Minnesota Legislature.

“This is an incredibly complex effort,” said Karri Plowman of the St. Paul Area Chamber of Commerce. “It’s important that people don’t think of (the Central Corridor) as just one project. There are a series of projects, including the fortification of two bridges and the moving of utilities.”

According to Plowman, who heads up the Central Corridor Partnership, the Business Advisory Council will be discussing aid to businesses along the Central Corridor during its meeting at 4:00 p.m. Monday, December 15, at the Court International Building, 2550 University Ave.

The Metropolitan Council is also holding a series of open houses to update the public on the Central Corridor project. Light-rail engineers and planners will be available from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. Wednesday, December 3, at Central Presbyterian Church, 500 Cedar St.; from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. Thursday, December 4, at the Brian Coyle Center, 420 15th Ave. S. in Minneapolis; and from noon to 2:00 p.m. Saturday, December 6, at Goodwill Easter Seals, 553 N. Fairview Ave.

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