

SAPCC Transportation Committee
December 27, 2022

Present: Scott Jensen, Betty Wheeler, Kim Frair, Karen Nelson, Pat Thompson

Guests: Trista MatasCastillo, Ethan Osten, Alan Larson (SSAP resident, interested in becoming a committee member)

Minutes

The minutes of November 29, 2022 were approved unanimously. Motion: Wheeler/Jensen.

Agenda

We welcomed Ramsey County Commissioner Trista MatasCastillo to the meeting to discuss policy implications for county road projects in the future, based on what happened with the Cleveland Avenue project.

Before we got started, we asked Commissioner MatasCastillo to tell us about the recent news of future funding for transit, bike and pedestrian projects through the Metropolitan Council's Regional Solicitation. She serves on the Transportation Advisory Board, which decides on that funding (as well as Mitra Jalali and a number of Saint Paul community members). The November meeting led to a lot of funding for the east metro, which passed on close 15–17 votes. Transit, bike, ped projects were funded. (Rice Street, an east metro BRT line, multiple Saint Paul city projects, EV charging.) Lively and heated discussion, important to meet climate goals. Climate, racial, transit equity all go together. There was a *Pioneer Press* story:

<https://www.twincities.com/2022/12/25/met-council-rice-street-express-bus-transportation-projects-federal-funding/> Watching the TAB recording would be worth it:

<https://metro council.org/getdoc/1c6b9636-ae24-4603-9598-45a1a6f62834/Agenda.aspx> The commissioner said the projects include funding for what she called “over-programming,” which means projects will happen even if specifics change as things go along, rather than having to go back to the drawing board to reapply.

Cleveland: As background, Commissioner MatasCastillo said she wasn't tracking the Cleveland project closely in spring 2022 for several reasons. There are many projects taking place in the county, and commissioners are responsible for all of them. She wasn't yet representing this area (it was on the edge of her district until January 2023 when redistricting took effect). And finally, when the trees were marked in late May 2022, she was out of the country, working on the county's organics recycling program.

She wanted us to know that the impact the community response had on county staff (and electeds) was substantial and no one wants anything like this to happen again.

She recently visited with construction labor trainers who told her in detail about how trenching works, and that on long trenches (as with laying pipe), they have to go out two feet for every foot of depth. Vertical trench boxes can be used for smaller areas, but for long stretches they are not possible.

We asked: **How can the county's commitment to public engagement be improved?** If important parts of a project change after engagement is finished, what commitment is there to reengaging/communication with affected communities? Can that be made into policy?

Community engagement has been on an improvement path at the county over the past few years. Engineers are good at schematics. Everyone has different skillsets. They are working to transform, have more communication — have moved a staff person from general communication to Public Works. Their commitment is to residents first. The county has 4,000 employees; it's a big ship to turn. Things are not quick, people have tenure. The new Public Works director, who is not an engineer (a planner), had his first day as interim on May 27 — the day the

trees were marked. He had only joined the county as a deputy head a few months before that (his area was multimodal).

Overall: the county is committed to improving community engagement in all areas. They want to tailor by department. That means using a best practices approach, rather than policy, because it needs to change by community. Policy would be stagnant. Engineers, for instance, would be too rule-based and inflexible if it was policy, and it would be hard to change and improve it as needed.

We asked how the county can be more tree-forward in its planning and implementation of projects? What does it mean to be “tree-forward” or is there a better term?

The commissioner’s answer was on a general level, but policy-oriented: Climate resiliency and sustainability have been added to the county’s priorities. They have hired a person to analyze projects this summer. She is assessing, building out the team. They are the first county in Minnesota to do this. It is parallel to their all-abilities plan – something that can be implemented across future projects. It will include tree canopy and habitat.

As far as Cleveland specifically, the county is committed to watering the new trees for at least a year, might be longer (we had an answer on this earlier but at this meeting none of us could recall the answer). We discussed the problems of deficient fill/soil and its effect on the trees. Need for proper bid specs and field inspection. The commissioner confirmed that the county doesn’t necessarily go with the low bid.

Nelson expressed that she has come to see street trees as built-in tragedies: When a street is completely rebuilt including the underground utilities, it’s more work than when it was first built. However, there are some more clever contractors than others. Over-digging is a thing that is not necessary.

The commissioner informed us that she recently met with a group of SAP neighbors, including Wheeler from this committee, about the endangered rusty patched bumble bee, which has habitat along and around Cleveland. The county is taking one more look at possibilities for the project north of Folwell that could mitigate the effect on the bees.

We asked: What is the county’s commitment to separated bike facilities? How can they be built into policy so that implementation is not dependent on specific personnel or elected officials?

The commissioner said that the commitment is built in to policy (the all abilities policy). You can see it in the Rice Street project example that was just funded by the TAB. When she first joined the board, she was told by the previous Public Works director the street couldn’t have a protected bike facility, but that PW director is now gone and the project it will have protected facilities.

Research shows the need protected bike facilities in order to encourage new bike users (women, POC, youth). The new Public Works director shares this philosophy. It aligns with the new climate resiliency priorities. All the commissioners are now talking about it, the board now has 6 women members out of 7, 3 are POC. Equity is now key.

Finally, Nelson shared information about whether the retaining wall at the north end of the Cleveland project, along Larpenteur running east almost as far as Folwell and which is specified to MnDOT standards, is necessary at those specifications. Nelson (who is a civil engineer and works with retaining walls) said this adds unnecessary cost to the project.

Snow clearance

After the commissioner left, we discussed sidewalk snow clearance topics generally. SAPCC has been in touch with the volunteer Snow Angels group to see if there are people living near Seal Hi-Rise who can keep the path to the Green Line clear throughout the winter. The way across the Carleton Lofts driveway along Carleton was identified as a particular problem spot; maybe contacting that property manager would also help.

Generally keeping driveway crossings of sidewalks is one of the worst areas, as cars keep dragging snow out of parking lots or from the street into the parking lot.