

Bryn Mawr Neighborhood Association

Below are the comments regarding the Southwest Transitway Station Area Strategic Plan which were submitted February 25, 2011 on behalf of the BMNA.

In summary, we were critical of the Station Plan in several areas:

- The Station Plan understates the attractiveness of the Penn Station as a gate-way to the trails, parks and other amenities.*
- The Plan proposes additional barriers to the existing trails without providing other means of access.*
- There is only superficial recognition of the park-like setting of the station.*
- The plan focuses on users of the SW LRT without recognizing how cyclists and pedestrians would be affected.*

These comments resulted from the work and input of a number of residents, and hopefully represent a blend of opinions in the neighborhood. Let me know if you have questions or comments.

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Comments on the Southwest Transitway Station Area Strategic Planning Document

February 25, 2011

Additional Resources in Support of Station Planning

We appreciate the opportunity to participate in this planning process and suggest that the following two items would be a useful addition to the Station Area Strategic Planning document.

CLPA Charette

On November 14, 2010, the Cedar Lake Park Association and Bryn Mawr Neighborhood Association co-sponsored a Charette that looked at a number of features of the proposed Southwest LRT, including the Penn Station. Over 200 people attended the Charette, representing many neighborhoods and those organizations identified on page 7 of the Station Area Strategic Planning Document (Station Plan). Participants included elected officials, park board staff, and architects from around the country.

That day-long effort resulted in conceptual drawings and narrative that not only complemented the public input for Station Area Strategic Planning, but more accurately

reflected the issues which the Bryn Mawr neighborhood and near-by residents are concerned about. The Charette resulted in capturing good ideas and energy about the value, purpose and vision of the Penn Station.

The Station Area Strategic Planning document would be enhanced by the inclusion of the results of that Charette. The Station Plan could be strengthened by embracing a larger vision for the Penn Station and taking into account the work of the Charette. The tone of the Station Plan should be about what is possible. The Charette offers a view of that possibility, and should be included in the Station Area Strategic Planning document as supplemental material.

Capstone Project

A team of graduate students from the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs is conducting an economic and community development study for the Penn Ave. Station for the Bryn Mawr Neighborhood Association. The project is being conducted as part of a Capstone workshop for 2nd year Humphrey students. The study is being conducted from January to May 2011.

The goal of the Capstone project is to create a community development plan that establishes links within Bryn Mawr and to the adjacent areas, preserves the character and personality of the neighborhood, and promotes the viability of the proposed Penn Ave. LRT station. The report will include a diagnosis of the economic community development potential in Bryn Mawr, a vision for future development in the neighborhood, and an action plan that details strategies to achieve the vision. The results of this work should be included in the Station Area Strategic Planning document as supplemental material.

Specific comments on Station Area Strategic Planning Document:

Page 6 – Relationship to Locally Preferred Alternative (LPA) and other plans: The planning process should do more than build on the Locally Preferred Alternative and Alternatives Analysis (AA) process. The planning process should also, at a minimum, include other plans such as: Bryn Mawr Neighborhood Land Use Plan, North Loop Plan, Basset Creek Valley Master Plan and the Near North Side Master Plan, all of which have been through public scrutiny and approval. These plans should be included as a supplement to the Station Area Strategic Planning Document.

Page 10 – Van White as Transitional Station: This transitional approach to the station's character should be consistent with and support the approved Master Plans for this area (Bryn Mawr Neighborhood Land Use Plan and Basset Creek Valley Master Plan).

Page 10. Access to recreation: The rest of the plan should be consistent with how the Penn Station is characterized here on page 10. While the Penn Station is shown as providing gateway access to recreational areas at the beginning of the document, this issue is not discussed in the section for the Penn Station. As suggested by this statement on page 10, the Penn Station would offer gateway access both by offering transit connections, and also by providing better access to the valley for cyclists and pedestrians. The Metropolitan Council estimates that cyclists already make 450,000 visits to the Cedar Lake Regional Trail annually, and the Penn Station would provide a convenient access point to the popular trail system.

Page 11 – City Policy on Park-n-Ride: The neighborhood supports the city policy on Park-n-Ride and expects that bus service will be provided to the station to provide the proper connections to existing transit options.

Page 12 – Next Steps: The Station Plan recognizes the need to work with stakeholders and the BMNA welcomes continued involvement.

Page 33 – Van White Station pictures. Two of the pictures are some distance outside the service area for the Van White Station.

Page 34, 39, 40, 41 – Van White station will serve Bryn Mawr neighborhood: As described in the Station Plan, the Van White Station would provide minimal access for Bryn Mawr residents. Access across Bryn Mawr Meadows and the elevated pedestrian bridge over the tracks would be difficult if not prohibitive for most of the neighborhood. Under this scenario, the station would be an option only for the extreme northeast part of the neighborhood. The situation is made even more extreme by the planned disappearance of the pedestrian bridge. According to the Basset Creek Valley Master Plan, the pedestrian bridge across the tracks will be eliminated.

Page 36 – Land Use: The Station Plan is inconsistent with the Basset Creek Valley Master Plan by allowing cherry-picking by developers of choice parcels rather than relying on a Master Developer to redevelop parcels in the area in an orderly manner.

Page 38 – Van White provides I-394 regional access. It seems that the Penn Station also provides regional access by providing an easy connection to I-394, and this same consideration should be applied in the section on the Penn Station. The document understates access opportunities for the Penn Station.

Page 41 – Barriers to access: The Station Plan describes how the industrial character and vehicle-focused land uses act as a psychological barrier for pedestrians and cyclists. This is contradicted by any casual observance of the heavy pedestrian and cyclist use of the trail. Pedestrians and cyclists already heavily use the area, and the use is likely to increase with recent development of the trail. A recent article in the StarTribune stated that "the existing trail drew almost 1,200 daily users in a 2008 count, and Minneapolis bike planner Don Pflaum predicts that will at least double once riders can reach the river."

Page 43 – Moving the Van White station: The Van White LRT station has been placed in a different location from that outlined on the Basset Creek Valley Master Plan. No clear explanation was provided for moving the station. The TKDA plan and the Basset Creek Valley Master Plan resulted from a significant amount of research conducted in order to insure that the Van White Boulevard was placed in such a way that it supported the LRT station to be built below it. The location also supported the various trails that go through that location, and insured that there would be adequate passage between East and West Linden Yards. Moving the station is a significant adjustment considering that the Cedar Lake Regional Trail sees over 450,000 visits by cyclists annually. Far more research went into the Basset Creek Valley Master Plan than went into the Station Area Planning effort.

Page 44 – Access to Cedar Lake Regional Trail: The neighborhood agrees with the referenced interest in providing greater pedestrian and cyclist access, as also addressed in the Basset Creek Valley Master Plan. However, the protection or enhancement of this access is not adequately addressed in the Station Plan. Instead, in the discussion of the Penn Station, the Station Plan proposes to further obstruct and impede access by building a fence.

Page 45 – Bus stop on opening day. The document is inconsistent in how it deals with bus access. Neither the Van White or Penn station currently has bus access, yet the opening day recommendation for the Van White station includes a bus stop. The same recommendation should be made for the Penn Station.

Page 45 – Many years to realize enhancements: Contrary to what the Station Plan indicates, the master developer has a short window of time in which to make significant progress.

Page 47 –NiceRide station. Good recommendation for both Van White Station and Penn Station. NiceRide also appears on the “Next Steps” chart (page 74) for the Penn station, and it is featured in the text on page 69. Because of the heavy use of the trails in the vicinity of both stations, provision should also be made for bike storage (bike racks or bike lockers) for riders who cycle to the stations.

Page 47 – Relocate bike path to parallel Van White Station. Putting sharp curves in a commuter bike path seems unwise and obstructs the free flow of cycle traffic. It is better to provide spur access to the station rather than bringing the path to the station. The neighborhood objects to suggestions in the Van White Station area plan that sharp turns be introduced in the Cedar Lake Regional Trail for the purposes of diverting it in the direction of the station platform.

Since the vast majority of Cedar Lake Regional Trail users will NOT be seeking to access the Van White station, forcing all riders to slow down and navigate turns and pedestrian traffic, will lead to congestion and heighten safety concerns. Instead, it makes much more sense to preserve the safety and increase the usability of America's first bicycle freeway by creating a spur that will allow station access for a small number of riders that will use the station.

Furthermore, the Kenilworth Trail and Cedar Lake Regional Trail, both heavily used trails, come together adjacent to the proposed Penn Station. For this reason, the Penn Station may actually provide a more attractive access point for cyclists because of its proximity to this juncture in the trail system.

Page 55 – Land Ownership: The development of the Penn Station may not require the use of private land because of the parcel owned by MnDOT on the bluff and public entities in the valley. Development on the bluff ancillary to the Station access would require private property.

Page 56 – Land use: Characterizing the use of open space in the valley as “passive” may be misleading. In reality, this is heavily used open space with almost one million active cyclists using this area of prairie restoration and converging trails annually. This is a highly valued amenity and the presence of occasional freight trains has not limited its use.

A major shortcoming of the Station Plan is its failure to demonstrate how the Penn Station would assist in the access and use of the parkland, lakes and bluff. This is addressed with considerable vision and some detail in the work of the CLPA/BMNA Charette. The Penn Station can become a regional attraction and destination. It would be another gateway to the park.

Page 58 – Roadway congestion: The traffic queues on the bridge have little to do with pedestrian and cyclist experience. However, the heavy traffic at the intersection is a problem.

Page 61 – Minimal visibility. Actually, minimal visibility in the valley would be a positive, if the station were designed to visually blend into the park-like landscape. Making the station less visible seems desirable. Visual clues at the upper level could easily signal the presence of the station.

Page 63 – Users of Penn Station. While the document dwells on use by Bryn Mawr residents north of I-394, it does not explore other possible users, including the Harrison neighborhood to the north. Given the correct infrastructure, the residents of Lowry Hill would have access also. The station would also be a bicycle hub for access to the trail network, a much more useful and attractive option than other stations discussed in the document. A bus connection would make the station accessible to the north and I-394.

Page 64 – Summary Analysis: One of the “Principles” should be expanded to “address pedestrian and bike **access** to trails in a manner that provides safe crossing of freight rail and LRT.” The present crossing of the tracks shows the current demand for access. That access must be maintained, whether the stations are built or not.

Disrupting access to the Cedar Lake Regional Trail while not providing a simultaneous improved access is illogical and unacceptable. The Cedar Lake Regional Trail was the first federally funded commuter bicycle trail. It is a prior use that has proven HUGELY successful at reducing VMT (Vehicle Miles Traveled) by encouraging and facilitating bicycle commuting and recreational biking/hiking/walking, and the whole point of LRT is to reduce VMT. It is unreasonable and shortsighted to disrupt neighborhood access to or neighborhood use of the Cedar Lake Regional Trail for the purposes of constructing/operating the SW LRT.

Also, it is important to “protect the park-like nature of the setting”, and this should be added to the list of principles. This applies to any construction, including the design of the station platform, bridge, access, etc.

Also, the representation of “community members split” on the station is a real surprise. Access for the Bryn Mawr neighborhood to the Van White station is much more problematic than access to the Penn Station. The Van White station is both distant to most of the neighborhood and would sit beyond the barrier of an unfriendly pedestrian bridge over the tracks. That same bridge is planned for elimination. The 21st street station is nearly inaccessible to the Bryn Mawr neighborhood.

In general, the Station Plan would do better to point out that the Bryn Mawr neighborhood would not be served by the LRT system if the Penn Station were not built. This should be discussed in the vision for the Penn Station, showing how essential the

station is for the neighborhood. Without the station, the neighborhood will have no other option for LRT access.

Page 65 – Pedestrian underpass. This option has the singular advantage of lower cost, and there is no discussion of the problems associated with it. A tunnel has physical problems related to the water table and is a safety threat. The existing pedestrian spiral is avoided by residents, is not ADA compliant, and would not be a useful access to the platform level.

The Station Plan only considers constructing a fence in the section of the document on the Penn Station. The issue of whether to construct a fence should probably appear in the discussion of each station, not just Penn. The Bryn Mawr neighborhood has repeatedly raised concerns about losing access to the trails, and the Station Plan singles out the area adjacent to the Penn Station for more restricted access.

Alternatives for existing access to the trails all along the LRT route should be discussed. The multiple approaches to the trails reflect current demand and somehow should be addressed.

Page 69 – Construct trail underpass and not construct roadway: Both these ideas should be supported. The Cedar Lake Regional Trail is a major cycling freeway and there should be a grade separation where it meets the LRT track. A new roadway in the valley would compete with the park-like nature of the area.

Page 74 – Next Steps: Specific bus-LRT connections should be explored and added to the “next steps.” This would include connection to a north-south route and the I-394 route.

The “Next Steps” summary for the Penn Station is the only one that includes the building of a fence, even though the crossing of existing tracks occurs at other places where stations are planned (e.g. Page 97). The document should be more consistent and discuss issues like this in a consistent fashion for all stations.

In addition, building a fence is a poor excuse for a plan. As explained above, it is unreasonable and unacceptable to limit neighborhood access to the trails by building a fence without simultaneously providing improved accessibility in other ways.

Providing access by way of a tunnel at the pedestrian spiral has prodigious problems for pedestrians as well as cyclists. Those problems are especially related to safety, real and perceived. In addition, the inclusion of a tunnel in the Penn Station Plan is an additional assault on adequate, bike-friendly access to the trails from the residential neighborhoods to the north, especially Bryn Mawr. Fencing off current de facto access and then crowding bikers and pedestrians together on a narrow spiral and through an underpass does NOT constitute adequate bike-friendly access and will in fact frustrate and impede the safe use of the Cedar Lake Regional Trail.

Bryn Mawr is an extremely bike-centric neighborhood and would suffer greatly if this access issue is not better addressed. This issue has been raised repeatedly by the neighborhood from the beginning of this planning process (see page 64). Instead of protecting or enhancing access to the trails, the Station Area Strategic Planning document has shown more ways to limit access.