



Board Report

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Agenda Number: 41.

REGULAR BOARD MEETING AUGUST 25, 2022

SUBJECT: VERMONT TRANSIT CORRIDOR

ACTION: RECEIVE AND FILE

RECOMMENDATION

RECEIVE AND FILE status report on Vermont Transit Corridor Project's Community-Based Partnership Program.

ISSUE

In Fall 2021, Metro staff implemented a Community-Based Partnership Program (CPP) to inform the next phase of planning for the Vermont Transit Corridor. The CPP included various activities that focused on gathering quantitative and qualitative data that would be used to develop a proposed project for the Vermont Transit Corridor. Through the CPP, Metro sought to allow stakeholders an opportunity to provide important insights into the challenges and opportunities facing the communities in the area and can help improve Metro's ability to communicate and connect with a wide range of community members. The CPP was designed utilizing Metro's Community-Based Partnering Strategy. The CPP:

- A. Provided stakeholders who live, work, play, study and/or worship along Vermont with an opportunity to express their thoughts about possible transit improvements they envision.
- B. Ensured that Metro staff received comments from a diverse group of stakeholders who do not often participate in helping shape their community; and
- C. Informed a planning approach that considers short-term, medium-term, and long-term transit improvements for the Vermont Transit Corridor.

BACKGROUND

The study area for the Vermont Transit Corridor extends approximately 12.4 miles from Hollywood Boulevard in the north to 120th Street in the south (Attachment A). It is the busiest north-south travel corridor in the entire Metro bus system with about 45,000 daily boardings pre-COVID, connecting the B and D Lines (Red and Purple), the E Line (Expo) and C Line (Green), various east-west bus lines as well as many key activity centers, including educational, cultural, medical, governmental, and faith-based institutions.

Funding in the amount of \$425 million for improvements for the Vermont Transit Corridor is identified as part of the 2016 voter-approved ½ cent sales tax from Measure M and other local and state sources. To prepare for those improvements, Metro has completed three studies as discussed below.

Vermont Bus Rapid Transit Technical Study

In February 2017, Metro completed the Vermont Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Technical Study, which evaluated the feasibility of implementing BRT, including bus lanes and other key BRT features. The study identified two promising BRT concepts that were developed with the goal of improving bus speeds and reliability, accommodating higher ridership, and improving the customer experience.

At the March 23, 2017, Board meeting, staff presented the findings and recommendations from the Vermont BRT Technical Study (Item #9, Legistar File 2016-0835). At the same meeting, due to the high transit-dependent ridership on the corridor, the Board approved a motion by Directors Garcetti, Ridley-Thomas and Dupont-Walker (File # 2017-0213) directing staff to proceed with the Vermont BRT project as a near-term transit improvement, while also initiating a study that analyzed the feasibility of rail (Attachment B).

Vermont Rail Conversion/Feasibility Study

The Vermont Rail Conversion/Feasibility Study was completed in 2019. It analyzed rail options and further evaluated the BRT concepts to ensure they do not preclude a later conversion to rail. The study found that: BRT continues to be feasible in the Vermont Corridor; BRT does not preclude conversion to rail transit in the future; BRT has the capacity to serve ridership demand at least until 2042; rail transit would maximize the mobility benefits along the corridor and in the region; and three rail alternatives were identified and determined feasible for future implementation.

Additionally, on April 17, 2019, the Board approved Motion #16 by Directors Garcetti, Dupont-Walker, Hahn, Solis and Butts directing staff to advance three BRT alternatives and the three rail concepts identified in the study into environmental review. The Board motion also directed staff to look at the feasibility of extending the Vermont Transit Corridor approximately ten miles south from 120th Street to the South Bay J Line (Silver) Pacific Coast Highway (PCH) transitway station (Attachment C).

South Bay Extension Feasibility Study

The South Bay Extension Feasibility Study was completed in March 2022. It assessed the feasibility of extending the BRT and rail alternatives further south on Vermont Avenue from 120th Street to the South Bay J Line (Silver) PCH transitway station.

Current Status

In Fall 2020, Metro staff issued a Request for Proposal (RFP) for the environmental clearance of the BRT and rail alternatives identified in previous studies. However, staff later cancelled the RFP and instead implemented a new Community Partnership Program to inform the next planning phase for this important transit corridor and ensure that the community/stakeholders had an opportunity to better understand the transit options being considered and provide feedback. Working closely with the Office of Equity and Race and utilizing best practices outlined in Metro's CBO Partnering Strategy adopted in Spring 2021, the CPP for the pre-environmental phase of planning was launched in December 2021 and concluded in June 2022.

DISCUSSION

Prior to the Vermont Transit Corridor Project moving into the environmental review process, Metro has conducted a pre-environmental community-based planning engagement program. Because the individual experiences of people vary along the length of the Vermont Transit Corridor, Metro turned to people who live, work, play, study, and/or worship in the area, enlisting them as the subject matter experts and asking them how they envision transit improvements.

Therefore, as a key component of the CPP, Metro partnered with corridor-wide Community Based Organizations, including community development organizations, faith-based organizations, social service organizations, and local neighborhood groups, to solicit input about the types of improvements that should be considered along the corridor. Utilizing Metro's Community Based Organization Partnering Strategy, staff developed a CBO Partnership Program that fostered collaboration with local communities and allowed diverse stakeholders to share their vision for improvements along the Vermont Transit Corridor.

The objective of the CBO Partnership Program was to collaborate with organizations with deep roots within the Vermont Transit Corridor and enlist their network of stakeholders to participate in sharing their vision for future mobility improvements in the communities between Hollywood Boulevard on the north to 120th Street on the south and identify improvements for the corridor. Through this effort, Metro partnered with 20 different community-based organizations to expand engagement opportunities.

Equity-Focused Outreach Approach

Vermont Avenue reflects Los Angeles' cultural mosaic. If this avenue could talk, it would tell tales that range from Tinseltown, new migrant families coming to America, and the first Great Migration of African Americans to Los Angeles. Implementing an outreach approach across the corridor's vibrant and diverse communities is critical to ensuring that the multifaceted populations, along with the industry and social clusters, share their opinions about the future of public transit along Vermont Avenue.

Further, throughout the corridor, the project benefits Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color (BIPOC) and communities with very diverse socioeconomic backgrounds including a large percentage of low-income communities that heavily rely on public transportation to access jobs, schools, medical centers, and recreational facilities.

From attending services at the Islamic Center on Fridays to living near Fraternity Row by the University of Southern California to buying fruit from a street vendor near the Slauson/Vermont bus station to volunteering in the community garden in Westmont Athens, it is the people of the corridor that share a holistic narrative of the diverse communities that make up the entire corridor.

Further, Metro acknowledges there are institutional, systemic, and structural barriers that perpetuate inequity and silence the voices of communities over time. The CPP made equity the foundation of the community engagement approach. The outreach team had a singular guiding principle: Listen to and learn from the community what they know and what they want and deserve to be heard. Through this process, the CPP provided Metro with an opportunity to ensure stakeholders had a better understanding of the transit options being considered for Vermont Avenue and provide feedback.

Outreach was conducted in Armenian, English, Korean, Spanish, and Thai to ensure that all groups participated in the process. In addition, the team connected with stakeholders that speak Russian, Bangladeshi, and Zapotec (an indigenous dialect from the southern part of Mexico).

Community Engagement Activities

The engagement program started in December 2021 and was completed in June 2022. Throughout the six-month effort, the Metro team engaged with over 6,000 people via one of the following eight initiatives:

- 20 CBO Partnerships
- Thirty-two (32) CBO Partner-led Community Conversations
- Four (4) Metro-Hosted Community Listening Sessions
- Twenty-one (21) Key stakeholder briefings
- Twelve (12) Bus Rider Intercepts
- Eight (8) Community Events
- Eleven (11) School Presentations
- Eight (8) Focus Groups
- One (1) Corridor-wide Telephone Survey

Community-Based Organization Partnerships

Metro partnered with 20 community and faith-based organizations that provide services along the Vermont Transit Corridor to engage with their network of stakeholders who traditionally do not participate on transportation planning projects.

- Asian American Drug Abuse Program (AADAP) Employment Access
- AADAP Therapeutic Community
- AADAP Youth & Family Programs
- Anderson Munger YMCA
- Bryan Temple AME Church Community Development Corporation

- Bryant Temple AME Church
- Community Reflections
- El Salvador Foundation
- Friends of the Vermont Corridor
- Koreatown YMCA
- Koreatown Youth + Community Center
- Pacific Asian Consortium on Employment
- Southeast Community Development Corporation
- St. Mark AME Church
- Strategic Actions for a Just Economy (SAJE)
- TrueLA Church
- Ward AME Church
- West Athens Westmont Task Force
- Westmont-Athens ROTC Explorer Scouts
- Word of Encouragement Church

Details of all the activities that were completed for this effort including an overall summary of the findings, based on stakeholder feedback received, is summarized in a Community Partnership Program Documentation Report. The Executive Summary of the report is included as Attachment C.

Since the CBO partners work directly with people who live, work and study along the corridor, each provided a detailed plan for the engagement that included:

- Information distribution

Organizations shared information with the community in a manner that the population they serve is accustomed to receiving, such as newsletters, website announcements, email campaigns, flyer distribution to WhatsApp community group chats and church announcements.

- Community Conversations

Collectively, organizations hosted 32 virtual and in-person community conversations throughout the entire corridor. The intention of the community conversations was to provide a safe space for members of the community to share opinions and experiences about their transportation needs, the services Metro provides, and the future of the corridor.

Through the CBO Partnership Program, Metro staff was able to engage with seldomly heard stakeholders that included participants in shelters, rehabilitation centers, and those that are part of parent, youth, and older adult groups within the various, community-, social service- and faith-based

organizations. Of the 32 community conversations, nine (9) were held completely in Spanish.

Post Participation Evaluation

After the engagement period concluded, CBOs were encouraged to participate in a post engagement interview and complete a survey to provide feedback about their experience working on this program. All community partners felt that the people they serve felt heard during the engagement effort. They also recommended:

- Continued growth and partnership opportunities during the subsequent phases of the planning efforts.
- More workshops, discussions, and community interactive events and fairs.

Community Listening Sessions

More than 300 people participated in four Metro-hosted interactive community listening sessions that provided feedback on the proposed options for the future of the corridor. To ensure that everyone in the corridor could participate, one took place virtually in the evening and the other three took place in-person during the daytime and on weekends:

- Los Angeles City College - Saturday, April 30, 2022
- Ward African Methodist Episcopal Church - Saturday, May 7, 2022
- Irmas Youth Center - Saturday, April 23, 2022
- Virtual Meeting, Wednesday, May 4, 2022

The in-person community listening sessions featured various stations:

Station 1: Registration - attendees would sign in for the event and to receive project updates, after they register, they would receive directions on how to take part in the listening session.

Station 2: VTC Virtual Reality (VR) Simulation - attendees wore VR goggles to experience a virtual tour of Vermont Avenue. The trip started in the south at 120th Street and took participants on a ride north to Hollywood Boulevard, making stops along the way to several historic landmarks and favorite destinations: USC, L.A. Coliseum, Koreatown, museums, churches, among others.

Station 3: Storymap - After learning about the entire VTC in the virtual tour, participants had one more digital exercise. With a touchscreen computer, they identified places along Vermont Avenue that they

frequent, whether it was for home, work, study, play, worship, or other activities.

Station 4: “Taco about Transportation” - The outreach team had one-on-one conversations with participants, sharing details of the VTC project. In those conversations, the team provided information on the Bus Rapid Transit and Rail alternatives, answered any questions, and asked for feedback from current public transit users about their experience. After the conversation, participants were given a ticket to receive a light snack that included tacos.

Station 5: Vote - In the last activity, participants voted on which option they felt would best serve public transit needs. Options included:

- Make immediate improvements to the existing bus system along Vermont
- Pursue BRT for completion by 2028
- Pursue BRT and begin planning for rail beyond 2028
- Pursue rail only
- Do it all

Institutional Briefings

Metro staff met with 21 community, policy, and business leaders and their teams to provide in-depth presentations and discussions about the VTC. Below is a list of the organizations that participated in the briefings:

- American Career College
- Children's Hospital Los Angeles
- East Hollywood Business Improvement District
- Empowerment Congress
- Exposition Park Leadership Meeting
- Harbor Gateway North Neighborhood Council
- Hollywood Presbyterian Medical Center
- Los Angeles City College
- Los Angeles Exposition Park Leadership
- Los Angeles Southwest College
- Lucas Museum of Narrative Art
- Neighborhood Council Briefings - Corridor-Wide
- North Area Neighborhood Development (Empowerment Congress North)
- Pico-Union Neighborhood Council
- Rampart Village Neighborhood Council
- Rampart Village Neighborhood Council Pub Safety, Housing, Transportation Committee

- University of Southern California (USC)
- Voices Neighborhood Council
- West Athens Westmont Task Force
- West Coast University
- Wilshire Center Business Improvement District Board

Bus Intercepts

Since the VTC has the highest daily north-south ridership throughout the Metro bus system, the outreach team conducted twelve (12) transit rider intercepts where over 250 bus riders completed a survey at the most frequented bus stops.

- Vermont Avenue/3rd Street
- Vermont Avenue/Wilshire Boulevard
- Vermont Avenue/Exposition Boulevard
- Vermont Avenue/Slauson Avenue
- Vermont Avenue/Manchester Avenue
- Vermont Avenue/Athens Station

In a span of two weeks, the outreach team asked transit riders questions about the types of improvements they would like to see in the bus system and along Vermont Avenue. Conversations took place in English, Spanish, Korean, and Zapotec.

Booths at Community Events

The team attended eight (8) community events starting in December 2021. Below are the events that the outreach team participated in:

- 21st Annual Navidad en Los Angeles
- Westmont Food Drive
- Los Angeles Urban League Job Fair
- TrueLA Church Community Event
- Keller Park Bunny Hop
- Koreatown Youth + Community Center's Flores de Mayo
- Koreatown Youth + Community Center's Teen Summit
- Anderson Munger Family YMCA Senior Food Distribution

The team also conducted eleven (11) school presentations during this period.

Public Opinion Research

Focus Groups and surveys were conducted with residents along the VTC. Eight (8) focus groups were held in January 2022 with 72 participants. Focus groups were held in English, Spanish, Korean and Armenian.

A telephone survey was also conducted between March - May 2022 that received 1,137 responses from residents throughout the corridor. Surveys were completed in English, Spanish and Korean by respondents.

Overall Results

Based on the feedback of each of these six initiatives that made up the pre-environmental community-based planning effort, the general feedback from stakeholders from throughout the corridor included support for doing short-, medium-, and long-term transportation improvements.

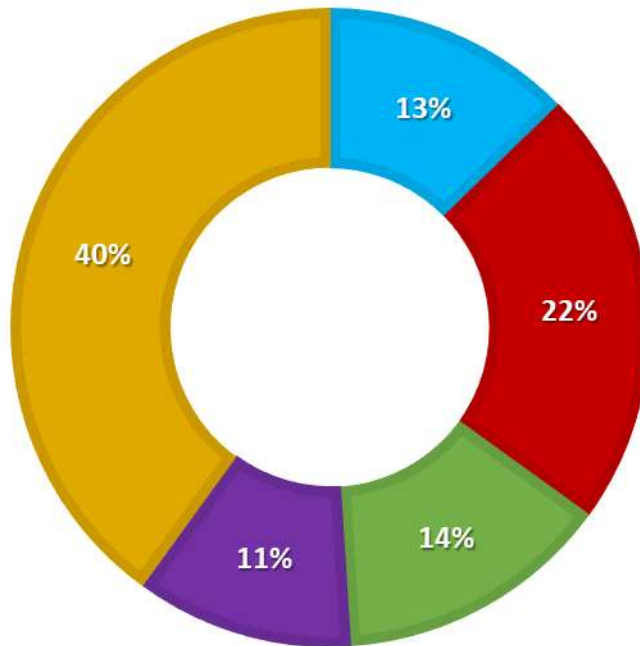
Short-term improvements: Metro should move forward with making immediate improvements to bus service along Vermont Avenue including adding benches, bus shelters and more buses to ensure frequency and reliability of services. Where possible, include bus-only lanes along key segments of the corridor during peak-hour service.

Medium-term improvements: Metro should begin planning for a Bus Rapid Transit project along Vermont Avenue to be in operation by 2028.

Long-term improvements: Metro should begin planning for rail to be delivered as soon as funding is available. Stakeholders recognize that this can take decades to implement.

Stakeholders were asked a series of questions about various transit modes they envision along Vermont that included making immediate improvements to the current bus service, delivering a BRT project by 2028, planning for rail as soon as funding is available or doing it all. Based on responses from all the various engagement activities, 40% of stakeholders would like to see Metro do it all: implement short-, medium- and long-term projects along Vermont as reflected in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Overall Feedback from Stakeholders for Transit Improvements along Vermont Avenue



- Implement immediate to the existing bus service along Vermont
- Pursue BRT for completion by 2028
- Pursue BRT and beginning planning for Rail beyond 2028
- Plan for Rail only
- Do it all (short-term bus improvement; medium-term BRT; long -term rail)

Summary of Comments

Community feedback received is organized by key topic areas and is provided in the Community-Based Outreach Documentation Report (Attachment D). Key themes that emerged during the CPP activities follow:

- Safety/Security Concerns/Opportunities:
 - Impacts to overall customer experience and safety due to unsheltered individuals using transit - bus, rail, stops and stations - in a way in which they were not intended.
 - Personal safety on buses and at stops.
 - Lack of surveillance cameras at stops, stations, and vehicles.
 - Lack of lighting at bus stops, especially south of Gage Avenue, and at stations.
- Equity Concerns/Opportunities
 - Fear of gentrification and displacement from rising housing costs and eminent domain.

- Desire for TOD projects to include affordable housing.
- Stakeholders questioned the overall funding allocation to this project as compared to other projects in more affluent areas of the county.
- Economic Concerns/Opportunities
 - Need to prioritize local hiring and job opportunities.
 - Ensuring impacts to businesses are mitigated.
- Customer Experience Concerns/Opportunities
 - Crowded buses.
 - Rider/passenger conduct/decorum leads to safety issues and confrontations
 - Perceived dirty, unsanitary & vandalized vehicles, stops, & stations and requests for more and regular cleaning.
 - Ensuring operator safety and mental health; requests for operator support.
 - Many positive comments about operators - helpfulness, kindness, courtesy, professionalism.
 - Some negative comments about operators including perceived racist behavior toward riders.
 - Many recommendations to better train operators.
 - Riders want to be treated with respect by transit workers.
- Transit Mode Concerns/Opportunities
 - Bus Rapid Transit
 - Regular transit riders overwhelmingly support dedicated lanes along Vermont Avenue.
 - Loss of parking will impact businesses along Vermont Avenue.
 - Loss of general-purpose lanes causing increased congestion along Vermont Avenue.
 - Opportunity for Metro to prioritize transit riders by implementing bus-only lanes.
 - Adding more frequent and reliable bus services is good.
 - Adding passenger amenities will be beneficial such as Wi-Fi, USB ports, signage, digital displays, art, shelter, seating, lighting, and bike racks.
 - Rail (Light and Heavy Rail Transit)
 - The corridor deserves rail as the busiest north-south bus corridor in the entire system.
 - Concerns about rail given the construction impacts caused by the Crenshaw rail project.
 - Concerns about the timeframe needed to deliver a rail project which can take decades.

EQUITY PLATFORM

Metro's Equity Platform Framework was the guiding document utilized in developing the Vermont Transit Corridor's Community-Based Partnership Program. As stated in the Equity Platform

Framework, community engagement is the basis for Pillar 2: Listen and Learn, which addresses the agency's effort to "listen and learn from the communities we serve." Our engagement efforts worked to ensure that the diverse range of community members left feeling heard, reflected, and respected. In doing so, the engagement effort has helped shape a vision for the Vermont Transit Corridor Project through the CBO Partnership Program and various activities that were implemented (as described above).

One example of incorporating community feedback is the "do it all" option. Early on in the CPP, when discussing the future vision of the Vermont Transit Corridor, staff heard from stakeholders that not only are immediate bus improvements to existing lines 204 and 754 needed, but that more can be done. Stakeholders like the idea of a Bus Rapid Transit project along Vermont by 2028, but also want Metro to plan for a long-term rail project as soon as funding is available. In summary, stakeholders voiced that Vermont deserves immediate bus improvements, a BRT, and ultimately a rail project.

Therefore, Metro staff's approach for planning future improvements along Vermont are as follows: identify transit and other immediate improvements along the corridor, move forward with initiating environmental review for a BRT project, and develop approaches for future rail improvements.

Staff will also continue Metro's collaboration with local communities and stakeholders during the next phase of planning and throughout the development of this project to ensure that the community is engaged and listened to every step of the way. Further, Metro will continue to implement a CBO Partnership Program with local community-, faith- and social-based organizations in the project's future development phases.

IMPLEMENTATION OF STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS

The project will support the goals of the strategic plan by enhancing communities and lives through improved mobility and access to opportunities through the addition of new high-quality mobility options, closing a gap in the transit network that provides outstanding trip experiences and enhances communities and lives through improved mobility and access to opportunity.

NEXT STEPS


Staff will begin the environmental review phase with the implementation of potential near-term improvements and additional study of the BRT alternatives as a medium-term improvement, while considering community and stakeholder input and coordinating with Metro Service Planning. Rail, as a long-term improvement, will also be included as a future phase in the environmental study to be implemented when additional funding becomes available. It is anticipated that an environmental study Request for Proposal will be issued in Fall 2022. Metro will keep the community informed on the progress of the study and upcoming decision points. Metro will also continue to utilize a CPP throughout all project development phases. CPPs are currently being applied to the Eastside Transit Corridor Phase 2 Project and I-710 Task Force efforts. Other major projects that will utilize a community-based organization partnership approach include the Sepulveda Transit Corridor, I-405 ExpressLanes, and East San Fernando Valley Light Rail, among others.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A - Vermont Transit Corridor Map
Attachment B - Board Motion (March 23, 2017)
Attachment C - Board Motion (April 17, 201))
Attachment D - Community-Based Outreach Documentation Report

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