

Bored light rail tunnel proposed as option to Portland Community College

SOUTHWEST CORRIDOR PLAN

By Erik Vidstrand
Southwest Portland Post

Over 50 residents of the West Portland Park and Far South West Neighborhood Associations met on August 13 to hear updates on the Southwest Corridor Plan.

Metro presented their latest findings based on a recent technical memo. The new president of Portland Community College's Mt. Sylvania Campus, Dr. Lisa Avery, discussed the college's role in the project.

According to Metro's analysis, constructing a bored light rail tunnel connecting PCC Sylvania to the rest of the system would provide a more efficient approach than the cut and cover tunnel previously considered by the steering committee in July 2015.

"A bored tunnel alignment may provide the most direct route connecting Barbur Boulevard and PCC," said Noelle Dobson, project spokesperson.

Though light rail transit is twice as expensive as bus rapid transit, light rail attracts more riders, according to officials.

"There will still be property and traffic impacts," Dobson warned, "but those impacts would be substantially less than from a cut and cover tunnel approach."

Metro identified potentially feasible alignments for further exploration, including a long-bored tunnel, a short-bored tunnel, and enhanced bus service.

The short-bored tunnel would be approximately 3,000 feet long between 53rd Avenue and Barbur Boulevard and west of Lesser Road. Hauling activities from the portal would take place at the staging area located northwest of Barbur Boulevard, taking over four years.

The long-bored tunnel alignment is approximately a mile long that travels from 53rd Avenue and Barbur Boulevard to a station located roughly 150 feet below PCC Sylvania.

Overall construction duration is estimated to be four-and-a-half years. While travel time and ridership for each option has not yet been analyzed, it is

believed the long-bored tunnel would have the shortest travel time as it contains the fewest curves.

Other options include an enhanced local bus service like the TriMet Line 44 which links the Barbur Transit Center and PCC Sylvania. Under this option, Line 44 would become a frequent service route running every 15 minutes all day.

College administrators will present their vision for future campus development and community input at the Southwest Corridor Plan steering committee meeting in October.

"Even though not many students use public transportation at the moment," Avery said, "faculty and staff are requesting better ways to reach the campus through bike routes and other means."

An improved pedestrian and bicyclist connection from a station in the vicinity of Barbur Boulevard and 53rd Avenue is proposed.

This segment would include stations on the campus and in the vicinity of Capitol Highway and Comus Street near Holly Farm Park and the Capitol Hill Library.

This route was chosen because it provides the shortest connection between Barbur Boulevard and the central campus and would impact the fewest residences compared to other streets.

Marcia Leslie, chair of the Far Southwest Association, said she has heard from a few neighbors that they would be OK with a bored tunnel but will have a much better idea after their neighborhood potluck schedule for Aug. 29.

"Some still have concerns," said Leslie. "One says that her house will be shaken off its foundation, and another has said he will probably sell, even though he doesn't live directly along 53rd Avenue."

PCC has remained neutral at the moment about light rail or bus rapid transit, and for that fact, any of the other options.

"Our campus is expanding," Avery stated. "As the largest community college in Oregon, we serve over 33,000 students with over 1,200 faculty and staff."

"We also open up our campus for community and cultural events such as



MAX light rail station at Washington Park taken in September, 2014. (Photo by Travis Estell, creative commons via Flickr)

pow-wows, film festivals, and dance troupes."

West Portland Park president Mike McNamara announced that a steering committee has been formed from both neighborhood associations.

"We will continue to monitor and study the Southwest Corridor Plan," he said.

"We have been very happy with Metro. They have been extremely nice and appreciate them coming to our meeting."

Moving sidewalks have also been talked about which would connect the station to campus via escalators. Officials said this option is not considered feasible due to the half-mile distance to be traveled.

It also might not fit the neighborhood character and would create potential conflicts with driveways and cross street traffic.

In addition, there are concerns with maintenance and operational reliability given the Pacific Northwest climate.

Bus shuttles could connect PCC Sylvania to the 53rd Avenue station and the Barbur Transit Center. This option has relatively low capital costs, but requires additional operations and maintenance.

In another option, autonomous vehicles/shuttles would connect PCC Sylvania to the 53rd Avenue station and the Barbur Transit Center. The system would operate on the local street network.

The technology is very new and is currently being tested, and changes in state and local laws may be necessary to allow for autonomous operation.

A comprehensive environmental review of the preferred package would likely begin in 2017 which will encompass substantial advancement of all designs including details on roadway widening, lane conversions, property impacts and any tunnel construction.

Construction could begin as early as 2021.



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