

Frogs croak, neighbors sweat, staff recommends light rail over bus rapid transit

SOUTHWEST CORRIDOR PLAN

By Erik Vidstrand
The Southwest Portland Post

So much for a rapid bus line along Southwest Barbur Boulevard or a tunnel to Portland Community College. These two components were recently nixed by project staff members who have been studying the Southwest Corridor Plan since 2012.

But the elected officials, who make up the steering committee, have the final say and will vote on the staff's recommendations in May. A recent planning meeting was held at the Southwest Community Center on April 6 with about half of the steering committee present. Metro staff presented their recent recommendations on the Southwest Corridor Plan.

Community members were crammed in a tiny room while frogs croaked outside and doors were propped open on the warmest night of the year.

Based on direction from the committee, technical analysis, and input from community and business groups including the general public, staff proposed light rail as the preferred high capacity transit mode and to eliminate the light rail tunnel alignment to PCC Sylvania.

They suggested exploring and refining alternative options to get to the college campus. According to Metro, growth ridership beyond 2035 could be accommodated by a MAX train but not with the bus rapid transit. Busses would also impact vehicular traffic through the corridor.

Light rail would be faster, more reliable, and more cost-effective to operate but not necessarily to build. There was clear public response for

light rail rather than busses.

As for the tunnel, ridership would not justify the cost of its construction. There would be more neighborhood and traffic impacts with a tunnel.

"Future investment on the Sylvania campus in response to an on-campus station is unclear," replied Metro project manager Chris Ford.

"While other options that connect the campus to light rail would be outperformed by a tunnel," Ford said, "the option would improve convenience, ridership, and travel times at a much lower construction cost."

The higher cost of the tunnel would also preclude funding for pedestrian, bike, and roadway projects that would connect to the major arteries according to Metro.

Staff presented additional solutions which include new bus lines with no transfers, a TriMet shuttle, and increasing the Line 44 and 78 schedules.

Some kind of mechanized transport such as a funicular or aerial tram was also discussed. Would the tram have community impacts as well such as the ability to view into private gardens and windows from above?

Brief public comment was then welcomed. First up was Linda Degman, director of the bond program at PCC.

"We are excited about the various transit options," Degman testified, "but disappointed that there won't be a direct access with a tunnel. Students won't get out of cars to sit on buses."

According to a 2011 online survey administered to students, staff, and faculty, over 70 percent drive alone to the campus.

Next testimony up was Chris who only gave his first name. He explained how Metro is operating in a 20th century mode. He described self-driving Google cars that could act as



An aerial tram is being considered to transport faculty and students from the light rail station at Southwest 53rd Avenue and Barbur Boulevard up to the PCC Sylvania campus. (Photo courtesy OHSU)

shuttles to and from campus as well as other areas in the corridor.

"This is not some kind of science fiction fantasy," he said. "By the time this project is done in 2025, the technology you are now using will be outdated. Google has already logged 1.5 million Google car miles."

Jim Howell, a retired engineer, provided a little history of the project to date. "First, this project was going to serve OHSU, drop down to Hillsdale and perhaps run under Multnomah Village. This is no longer the case. You pulled Tualatin out and now are going to drop PCC," he went on. "And still it's a \$2 billion project!"

John Gibbon, land use chair for the Southwest neighborhood coalition, questioned how extreme winter weather will affect the rail service. Roger Averbeck, SWNI transportation

chair, questioned the timelines.

Malu Wilkinson, project coordinator, explained the investment strategy in 2013 had extensive engagement with a long list of stakeholders.

Noelle Dobson, project spokesperson, said that all the reports were online and invited the participants to engage with staff. Maybe it was the heat or the cramped room, but participants decided to mingle and look at maps and reports and ask their questions individually instead of sitting around more tables.

The steering committee will be meeting on May 9 from 9-11 a.m. at the Tigard Town Hall. In June, the committee is expected to approve a "preferred package" of potential transit alignments for a federal environment impact review. For more information, visit www.swcorridorplan.gov.

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Scott Ford, one of our readers, enjoyed a fabulous salad and a copy of the *Southwest Portland Post* in South Waterfront. Where do you read *The Post*?

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