

Corridor Management Plan Communications Issues and Recommendations

Prepared by Karen FASTER, La Follette Avenue High-Speed Rail Corridor Group for meeting in Representative Joe Parisi's office, November 4, 2010

Up to now, only way people in Madison can try to get information is to read web site, contact public information officer in Milwaukee by telephone or email, sign up to receive email from Wisconsin Department of Transportation, or to listen at meetings. However, web site is not up to date, public information officer can take several days to respond and does not seem to be able to answer technical questions, state does not use email to inform people about canceled meetings or to release summaries of what occurred at meetings, and people cannot ask questions at the corridor management plan meetings unless they are members of the focus group.

Examples of poor communication

The October 21 Madison corridor management plan focus group meeting was canceled with 24 hours notice. The state's email list was not used to notify people. Information about Madison meetings is not posted on the state web site. A man drove from Watertown to attend the meeting in Madison and found out upon arrival that it was canceled.

The DOT published a newsletter November 1 but did not send an email out about its existence.

Consultants encouraged people attending public information workshops in small towns to call the Milwaukee public information officer to get answers to questions. A voice-mail message left on August 26 as to whether the August 31 meeting was going to include information about the Madison corridor, or just focus on the station, was not answered until the morning of August 31, and only after an additional rail official in Milwaukee was tracked down and left a message. The answer from two people was that it was to be just about the station. That focus suggests no general public meeting is to be held for people to get information about the corridor in the city of Madison so they can make informed recommendations to members of the corridor management plan focus group to pass along to the Wisconsin Department of Transportation and its consultants. However, a city of Madison staff member said October 27 later information about the corridor was added at the last second to the August 31 agenda.

The La Follette Avenue High-Speed Rail Corridor Group submitted questions to consultant on September 20 and to alder who served on corridor management plan focus group on September 30. A member of neighborhood group contacted Representative Parisi's staff person, who was told by a DOT official that all questions had to be formally submitted by a member of the focus group. Neither the consultant nor the alder advised the group about this requirement, which was not explained at the September 8 corridor management plan. Focus group member Dan Melton submitted the questions again on October 13, and the group received answers on October 20. Dan submitted a second round of questions after the October 21 meeting the group secured. No answers have been sent as of November 3, but the consultant emailed late October 31 that she was

working on getting answers. Many of the questions were ones posed at the October 21 meeting that the consultants said they would have to research to answer, but the group thought it best to formally submit them as instructed.

Audiences and limits of communication modes

Internet

Many people do not use internet or only use it sporadically. It cannot be the only means of communication.

Local media

Local news coverage is limited. Rail officials cannot rely on newspaper reporters to seek out new stories and update city residents about high-speed rail. One story by the Capital Times (September 23) has reported on the corridor management plan process.

Meetings

Many people cannot attend meetings because they work second or third shift or are housebound. Some meetings are held during work hours. Neighborhood group could only get a meeting at 4 p.m. and so people had to take time off work to attend. The public information meeting tentatively scheduled for December 15 starts at 4:30 p.m. and goes to 7:30 p.m., which covers work hours and the dinner hour, making it difficult for people with children to attend.

The DOT does not publicize the corridor management plan focus group meetings with its email list for which interested individuals can sign up.

At the October 21 meeting, when we asked the consultants “How are decisions, plans and timelines going to be communicated to people living in the neighborhoods near or owning property adjacent to the railroad corridor?” the response was that *residents are welcome to attend the corridor management plan meetings (as observers) to learn more. The corridor management plan process is in place so that the neighborhood can be involved in giving input to the DOT.*

That response does not answer the question. The remaining one (or is it two?) corridor management plan meeting does not allow for people to ask questions. Also, only focus group members are allowed to speak, so individuals cannot give input. The list of focus group members has not been shared with the public.

The public information meeting cannot be the only means by which hundreds of people who own property on the corridor find how the rail construction will affect them and their property.

Kinds of audience for corridor information

1. People who want as much information as possible and who want to make recommendations and try to influence decisions by designers and policymakers.
2. People who seek information and want to know ahead of time what will happen and might try to influence decisions.

3. People who want information but do not have the wherewithal or resources to seek it.
4. People who will accept what is decided and not try to influence decisions but will want to know final decisions and how they will affect them before the construction starts.
5. People who initially do not care, but then become interested and perhaps concerned.
6. People who want to influence decisions when the opportunity to do so has passed.
7. People who get angry and throw tomatoes at trains. They feel trapped and disenfranchised.
8. People who never will do not care.

A communications plan can inform people in groups 1-5 above. The same communications plan can anticipate the responses from people in groups 6 and 7. People in group 8 won't pay attention to the plan.

Recommendations for communications plan

Minimum of monthly communication from DOT to residents and property owners along the corridor, starting now.

Assign at least one DOT staff person *who lives in Madison* to serve as a neighborhood liaison and be quick to respond to questions and concerns. Over and over again we hear how quickly the process is moving, and we wish to respond quickly, but we cannot make recommendations and inform the corridor management plan focus group without accurate information given us in a timely fashion. Consultants from Milwaukee are not familiar with the city and are dismissive of local concerns.

Newsletter sent via postal mail and email to every property owner *and* resident who lives or owns property within two blocks of the corridor. For streets and pedestrian-bicycle crossings to be closed, consider extending mailing to six blocks of cross streets and paths.

First newsletter should

Describe project to date

List the streets and pedestrian-bicycle crossings slated and expected to be closed.

They are listed in the 2001 environmental assessment. Update the list based on subsequent research – at least two of the Madison streets have already been closed.

Explain that although no final decisions have been made, engineers and designers are close to announcing decisions about where fences will be and say when those decisions will be released. Describe types of areas likely to be fenced: areas of high trespass identified during the corridor management plan process.

Release possible heights and styles of fencing right away.

Explain why fencing is needed. Consultants have said the speed of the train is NOT what dictates need for fence; safety dictates need for fence. Articulate in lay language and with photographs and video what makes high-speed train unsafe if speed is not the reason. If part of the answer is that the train will be so quiet and quick, post online a video of such a train on the internet to illustrate the point.

Tell property owners and residents the worse-case scenario for fence placement in relation to their property lines. Explain how (if true) width of railroad-right-of-

way varies from lot to lot, and state whether the design will try to put the fence as close to the tracks as possible or as close to the lot line as possible.

Answer the question as to whether the high-speed rail corridor and the fence are likely to harm value of a property. Current argument from the consultants seems to be that property values along the corridor are already lower because of the railroad. However, city of Madison has granted construction variances along the corridor to property owners because of the corridor's "green space," suggesting that property abutting the corridor has significant value that could be lost because of fence, signals and upgrade.

Explain expected frequency of high-speed train, hours of operation. Be clear one trip involves the train coming all the way into Madison and then going back out the way it came in. Be clear on explaining whether train from Madison to Minnesota would follow the same route. Be clear that WI DOT does expect freight train traffic to increase. The November 1 *From Vision to Reality* high-speed rail newsletter says a reason to invest in high-speed rail is that it "[i]ncreases capacity and reduces travel times for freight rail operators." Until now, the message has been no one knows whether or how track improvements will affect freight traffic.

Include a map of the route inside the city of Madison. Also show route(s) of train for planned route(s) to Minnesota. Does the east side bear the entire burden of high-speed rail?

Include the decision-making timeline and how people can get more information and make recommendations. Be careful implying that people on different portions of the corridor have different time windows for getting information and making recommendations to the corridor management plan focus group. We hear different deadlines from different players, and we are wary because if we go with the later deadline, we believe we will then be told we are too late.

Then, send a monthly postal and electronic update. Some of the above information will need to be repeated for people who disregarded earlier messages.

Other ideas to consider, beyond communications corridor management plan

Redo the environmental assessment to take into account official bicycle-pedestrians trails, closed businesses and redevelopment plans (Union Corners and maybe others), changes in socio-economics of affected neighborhoods.

Include adding pedestrian-bicycle crossings in high-traffic de facto illegal crossings. Make them legal. Their existence demonstrates their importance.

Think about how fence will *decrease* public safety in terms of assaults (people being dragged inside the fence and up a few blocks); pedestrians walking illegally inside the parallel fences; reduced access for ambulance, fire and police to areas where streets are closed off; reduced daily contact between people from different neighborhoods because of reduced pedestrian, bicycle and motor vehicle traffic.

Research and communicate findings about relationships between property values and fencing areas – fencing a four-lane highway, for example. The city of Madison gave \$300,000 to McDonald's because of the ped-bike bridge over East Washington Avenue. That change in a transportation corridor harmed the value of a property.

Slow the design process down and do it right.