

County of Milwaukee
Interoffice Communication

DATE: 4/10/2018
TO: Theodore Lipscomb, Sr., Chairman, County Board of Supervisors
Chairperson, Transportation, Public Works & Transit Committee
FROM: Julie Esch, Interim Director, Department of Transportation
SUBJECT: Bus Rapid Transit Project Update

BACKGROUND

The adopted 2018 Transit Budget required an update to the Board of Supervisors on the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project following any decisions by the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) in early 2018.

Route analysis for the East-West BRT project began in 2016. An initial application for a Small Starts grant was submitted to the FTA in fall 2016. The adopted 2017 Milwaukee County Budget included Capital funding for about half of the expected project cost. Based on the initial funding commitment and Small Starts application submitted in 2016, the FTA considered the BRT project to be in development phase, focused upon design, preliminary engineering, and environmental work.

In September 2017, Milwaukee County submitted an updated Small Starts Application to the FTA, which included a route design with dedicated bus-only lanes along 53% of the route and up to 19 BRT stations. The 2018 recommended transit budget did not include funds for the BRT project because the updated grant application was in the process of being re-reviewed by the FTA.

In October 2017, a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) report was submitted to the FTA, who in turn provided helpful feedback on the draft document. Completing an EA is a necessary step in the process of getting an FTA grant, and aids in documenting how BRT will fit into the man-made and natural environment along the project corridor.

In March 2018, the FTA awarded the BRT project a Medium rating. Projects that score a Medium rating or higher are eligible for Federal Funding. The Federal Budget signed by President Trump on March 23, 2018, signals that the East-West BRT project is positioned well for funding in the 2019 Federal Fiscal Year. Before a full funding agreement will be executed, Milwaukee County needs to finish the Environmental Assessment for the project.

While progress on the Environmental Assessment continues, the FTA is emphasizing a need to focus on meetings that are inclusive of low-income populations, and minority communities. To that end dozens of meetings have been held with stakeholders, and targeted efforts have been made to ensure input from all members of the community to more fully understand both positive and negative impacts of the project.

Public meetings were scheduled through April 2018 to provide opportunities to explain the impacts of the project and collect any final input. All public comments are included in the EA report before it is finalized and submitted to the FTA. If the FTA is satisfied with the EA work, and finds that impacts of the project will not be significant, it will record a Finding of No Significant Impact, also known as a FONSI.

Once a FONSI is received, the BRT design will be finalized in a manner that is consistent with public input and the Environmental Assessment report.

Given the favorable rating by the FTA and acknowledgement of the project in the Congressional budget, Milwaukee County Department of Transportation is proposing to recommend that the County commit to the balance of the project cost, about \$31 Million in the 2019 transit Capital Budget. By budgeting fully for BRT, Milwaukee County will be authorizing expenditures on the project that will then be largely reimbursed by the FTA under a pending full funding grant agreement expected to be executed in early 2019.

In summary, the East-West BRT project is well positioned to get funding in the 2019 Federal Budget that begins October 1, 2018. MCTS will continue to anticipate a FONSI for the project, and await news of a full funding grant agreement in early 2019, which in turn will position us to take advantage of the 2019 construction season to make progress towards build-out of the BRT station platforms. If funding aligns with the construction season, MCTS could be operating BRT in late 2020.

For ongoing updates on the BRT project, please check out the project website: <http://www.eastwestbrt.com/>

RECOMMENDATION

This report is for informational purposes unless otherwise directed.

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Approved by:



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