Proposed Light Rail Line in Swede Hollow: Getting to the Last Mile

Ed Day

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Improving transit on Saint Paul’s East Side is generally not a controversial subject. However, a route being considered for light rail transit in the Rush Line Corridor is drawing questions from the Dayton’s Bluff community. The route in question would go through Swede Hollow Park.

The Rush Line will run about 40 miles from Forest Lake to Union Depot in downtown Saint Paul. Route options are pretty straightforward north of Maryland Avenue — either light rail or a dedicated bus rapid transit guideway would be built along Interstate 35E — but the various options to connect to the downtown area are more complicated.

The overall purpose of the transit corridor, according to the Rush Line website, is to serve the growing population of transit users. In particular, it will serve those who depend on transit such as the elderly and lower income persons, as well as those who choose a car-free lifestyle, as growing number of millennials do.

The main reason for opposing a light rail line through Swede Hollow is the fact that area residents have spent years transforming it into an urban oasis. “It’s been a community asset for quite some time,” said Tom Cook, special assistant for the president at Metropolitan State University, in a Sept. 10 community meeting at Our Redeemer Lutheran Church in Saint Paul. Cook added that the opposition to altering Swede Hollow has been “pretty robust.”

Mike Rogers, a transit project manager for the Ramsey County Regional Railroad Authority, who attended the meeting and has been gathering feedback about the project, noted that the most frequent comments about the project have been concerns regarding whether it would avoid Swede Hollow.

Rogers said that community feedback is a factor in the decision-making process. Like many governmental projects, the task force needs to provide evidence for all options prior to making a recommendation. Elevation issues could also be problematic in Swede Hollow.

One meeting attendee felt that the route through Swede Hollow would not be conducive to a station, which would make the route advantageous for people who wanted to get through the east side of Saint Paul but less useful for its residents.

Two options that generated discussion among attendees were potential routes along Phalen Boulevard and Seventh Street. The Phalen Boulevard segment would has the perk of serving a business corridor, while the Seventh Street segment would be more accessible to people in the community and would be the most direct route downtown.

Using Seventh Street would most likely mean the loss of some parking spaces and necessitate the construction of a bridge over the railroad tracks. There would also be some logistics to overcome on the narrower segments of the street. “It would very much change the character of the street,” said Rogers, noting that the change could be positive.

Last-mile connectivity — using buses, bikes, car-sharing programs and the like — is also important, according to Rogers. Other considerations include access to places people cluster such as Phalen Village, medical facilities and senior housing. “There are a lot of trade-offs,” said Rogers.

Comments, which can be made online or in person at community meetings, will be collected through Oct. 23, 2015.

Photo

File name: SignRushLine.jpg

Caption: The Rush Line may be routed through Swede Hollow.

Credit: Kevin Miller