

Rail Study Observations

October 17, 2017



We were supposed to get a **robust public engagement process**:

- planning study
- document review
- existing conditions and policy analysis
- recommendations and
- final report

The outputs of that process were to assist the Edina Transportation Commission and City Council with decisions regarding the future of passenger rail in Edina.

But I think any of us could have easily predicted in advance of the study that if you just ask our residents **general questions** about whether or not we should consider putting some sort of **commuter rail** on the Dan Patch line, the answer would be a resounding “**no.**”

I believe this is what was done, and I believe we learned nothing for the effort. It was a waste of time and money.

And because of this failure, we now have **no chance** of having a rational civic conversation about a commuter rail alternative that just might have been great for Edina.

The questions that were framed up in the study were:

- ***Should the City of Edina request elimination of the gag rule?***
- ***Should the City dedicate resources to developing a plan to encourage the development of passenger rail service in Edina?***

But the answers to these questions are meaningless unless the questions are put into a sensible context. That context was never created.

Kimley Horn gives a number of reasons why they conclude that the answers to these questions is “no.”

- **They studied today’s population density at Grandview (and nowhere else) and decided it was insufficient for the normal commuter rail projects they typically evaluate.**
- **There was strong opposition from the community. (But Kimley Horn cannot define exactly what the community opposes since K-H had not defined a specific type of use to which people could react.)**
- **Kimley Horn says one would need to build a “stronger case” for rail transit, but (i) if anyone could do that, it would have been Kimley Horn in this first effort at public engagement and (ii) now that K-H has clouded the public engagement process so thoroughly, I doubt that any case-building efforts will be successful for a long time to come.**
- **Kimley Horn is concerned that a project would require the cooperation of too many other municipalities to have a chance of being successful.**
- **Kimley Horn punted on the issue of what happens to property values along the track if there is (i) a lot more freight, (ii) high speed commuter rail or (iii) a trolley car that serves the neighborhood. So the most important input they might have provided to the process with their expertise was never really offered.**
- **Public responses show that people really wanted to know what the railroad’s plans for the Dan Patch line are. Kimley Horn could evaluate the evidence and use their expertise to provide that insight, but did not.**
- **Cost.**

What “context” was missing?

(1) Indications are that the owner and primary user of the Dan Patch rail line (CP Rail and TC&W) intend to put a lot more freight through that corridor.

These companies have made significant investments in the line over the past two years.



New equipment and grade crossing arms at Valley Lane in Edina



Restoration of Dan Patch line bridge over Minnesota River

What “context” was missing?

(2) Federal law preempts all attempts to regulate rail by state or local governments. In other words Edina has very little control over how much freight, or what kind of freight, might be put through our City on the Dan Patch line.

We would certainly have no power to convert the rail line right-of-way into a bicycle trail, as some respondents continue to suggest.



What “context” was missing?

(2) Residents were not given a plausible rail scenario before providing their reactions. In the absence of a “straw man” scenario, they filled in the blank with their own worst-case scenario.

Most respondents believed that what was being discussed was the same concept that they had fought so hard against in 2002 and 2008 – a high-speed passenger rail between Northfield and Minneapolis (that might have one stop in Edina).

No one ever wanted to re-visit that proposal, but the conversation was centered on the idea of high-speed commuter rail because the questions were so poorly framed.

What scenario might have been put forward for a more productive discussion?

What if, on the Dan Patch line, we could install a low-speed trolley car system that starts at the south border of Edina, has four or five stops in Edina, and ends at the SWLRT station in St. Louis Park?

This is a much simpler concept than the overly complicated ideas that Kimley Horn seemed intent on testing.

**This proposal
would require the
cooperation of
only two cities:**

- **Edina**
- **St. Louis Park**

This is not to minimize the needed cooperation of other governmental agencies, including Hennepin County, MNDOT, and the FRA, as well as the railroads themselves.



Cost

When he was on our Transportation Commission, Andy Brown calculated that Edina could put a fully functioning trolley system in place for less than \$20 million by purchasing some used equipment and building four stations in Edina. The intention would be to contract out as much of the operational functions as possible.

Kimley Horn did not evaluate the cost of that kind of project.



Why think about rail at all?

- The population of the metropolitan area will increase.
- Roads (and therefore BRT) cannot possibly support the commuters of the future without significant daily delays – even with expected technological advances.
- The Twin Cities will be competing with other metropolitan areas.
- Edina will be competing with other communities.
- The example of Illinois and Chicago.



Fear of change

- My fear is of Edina being left behind or left out of the Twin Cities transit network
- My fear is of more freight (grain? containers? oil? chemicals? Fertilizer?) being routed through Edina
- My fear is of commuters in the future cursing today's civic leaders (as they sit in traffic) because of a failure to plan for their infrastructure needs

How does this help homeowners?

- Allays fears of high-speed rail being put through this corridor
- Requires cooperative agreement with freight-rail haulers, which would likely preempt future volume increases
- It serves their neighborhood
- The rail line is there and is not going away – what use would you rather see it utilized for?

So how do I respond to each of Kimley Horn's reasons for why we should stop considering rail?

- **Population density:** They did not consider a trolley line with multiple stops in Edina.
- **There was strong opposition from the community:** Respondents were responding to the “boogey man” of high-speed commuter rail from Northfield. Respondents were also never informed about other important facts regarding this rail line.
- **A “stronger case” for rail transit is needed:** No doubt this is true, but Kimley Horn may have ruined our chances for being able to build that stronger case.
- **The project would require the cooperation of too many other municipalities:** Actually, the right project would only require Edina and St. Louis Park to work together.
- **Property values:** There is reasonably strong evidence that a trolley line would increase values all along it and in nearby neighborhoods. KH's expertise is needed to prove this out, but was not brought forth.
- **What are the railroad's plans for the Dan Patch line?** Evidence of the railroad's intention is out there and Kimley Horn could interpret it better than anyone, but did not.
- **Cost:** Although challenging negotiations with the railroad(s) would be required, it is believed that a trolley system could be put in place at a very modest cost compared to most rail transit projects.

End

