



Legislation Text

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WEST PHOENIX/CENTRAL GLENDALE HIGH-CAPACITY TRANSIT STUDY UPDATE

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Purpose and Policy Guidance

This report presents an update on the West Phoenix/Central Glendale (WPCG) high-capacity transit (HCT) study currently underway by Valley Metro in cooperation with the cities of Phoenix and Glendale. The purpose of this report is to inform the City Council of the study progress and to seek consensus to continue moving forward with public outreach and stakeholder engagement regarding the projects.

Background

In 2001, the voters of Glendale approved matching funds for a light rail corridor from 43rd Avenue to downtown Glendale. In 2005, regional voters approved funding for a high-capacity transit corridor extending from 19th Avenue to downtown Glendale. Funding was based on a combination of local, regional and federal sources. The most recent regional Transit Life Cycle program includes funding to complete a high-capacity transit corridor in Glendale by 2026.

Valley Metro, in cooperation with the cities of Glendale and Phoenix and the Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG), is conducting the WPCG Transit Corridor Study. Over the past 14 months, Valley Metro has been evaluating high-capacity transit alternatives to connect the existing light rail transit (LRT) line along 19th Avenue to downtown Glendale. The purpose of the study is to identify a preferred route and transit mode.

Analysis

Valley Metro is currently at Level 3 of the study, which is evaluating types of transit and routes. The purpose of this phase of the study process is to determine how the different types of transit and route combinations compare to one another. The process for improved transit options typically takes 10-12 years to get from planning to operations. Because of the significant lead time that is required and competition for funding, it is important to keep moving forward consistently and diligently in each phase of the process.

The routes currently under consideration in the Level 3 analysis phase are detailed below in two components - the connectivity component, which is examining how to connect to the Phoenix rail line by way of a Locally Preferred Alternative (LPA); and the downtown Glendale area. It is important to note that the downtown Glendale area west of 51st Avenue is designated as a special analysis area that is undergoing a separate, more

detailed evaluation. This will allow the study team to look deeper into issues in the core downtown area, such as potential impacts on historic properties, land use compatibility, pedestrian and traffic access, economic development opportunities, as well as stakeholder input.

Locally Preferred Alternative Routes

The route options under consideration for the LPA that would connect the Phoenix rail service to Glendale, as illustrated in Figure 1, are:

1. Camelback Road west, from 19th Avenue to 43rd Avenue, north to Glendale Avenue, then west on Glendale Avenue to 51st Avenue .
2. Glendale Avenue west, from 19th Avenue to 51st Avenue.
3. Camelback Road west, from 19th Avenue to Grand Avenue, northwest to 51st Avenue, then north to the Glendale Avenue area.

Downtown Glendale Area Routes

The route options under consideration for the downtown Glendale area are shown in Figure 2. A total of six downtown route options are being analyzed for impacts. They are:

1. Glendale Avenue to 55th Avenue, then south to Lamar Road
2. Glendale Avenue to 58th Avenue
3. Glendale Avenue to 55th Avenue, north to Palmdale, with a couplet that would go west on Palmdale to 58th Avenue, south to Glenn Drive, then east back to 55th Avenue
4. Glendale Avenue to 55th Avenue, north to Palmdale, then west to 58th Avenue (end of line)
5. Glendale Avenue to 55th Avenue, then north to Myrtle Avenue, with a couplet that would go west on Myrtle to 58th Avenue, south to Palmdale, then east back to 55th Avenue
6. North on 51st Avenue from Glendale, west on Glenn Drive to 55th Avenue, north to Palmdale, with a couplet that would go west on Palmdale to 58th Avenue, south to Glenn Drive, then east back to 51st Avenue

Transit Modes Under Consideration

In addition to the route analysis, two transit types are under consideration: light rail and bus rapid transit. Both modes would utilize an exclusive guideway system to increase speeds and therefore would have similar impacts on existing roadways and vehicular traffic.

Feedback Survey

At the May 6, 2014 Council Workshop, City Council provided direction to conduct a survey of the business community within the study area. Valley Metro coordinated with Glendale staff to develop and distribute a survey to businesses and property owners along Glendale Avenue, west of 43rd Avenue, in the downtown Glendale area. The survey was conducted in September 2014, with the goal of understanding property and business owners' current views of high-capacity transit and its impacts. The survey was distributed to over 1,200 businesses and property owners in two focus areas: 1) Glendale Avenue, 43rd to 51st Avenues; and, 2) Lamar Road to Myrtle Avenue, 51st to 59th Avenues. The surveys were distributed via mail and email, and complemented with a significant effort by Valley Metro on door-to-door canvassing. Respondents had the option of providing input online, via email, by mail or by fax. A total of 65 responses were received, which represents only five percent of the target group. Because of the low response rate, it is important to note that

while this survey data provides some insight into the stakeholder opinions, the results did not provide statistically reliant data. Here are some of the highlights from the survey:

- The average number of employees at these businesses is 11, of which 18% utilize transit to travel to the workplace.
- When asked to identify priorities for their business, a majority of respondents identified promoting economic development/improvement as their number one priority.
- When asked what type of improved transit service is preferred, the responses were:
 - 38% Light Rail
 - 26% Bus Rapid Transit
 - 21% None
 - 9% Need more information
 - 5% No preference
- When asked if they believed that improved transit service in the downtown area would benefit them, a majority of respondents said yes.

In summary, the results indicate that a majority of respondents prefer light rail technology, and are interested in creating economic development opportunities and generating walk-up business traffic. It is also important to recognize that some of the comments collected with the surveys demonstrated concern regarding construction impacts, as well as preserving the character of the downtown area.

Economic Development

For the Glendale Centerline Redevelopment Area, the presence or absence of high-capacity transit could have significant impacts for economic development and redevelopment, which may create long-term implications for the City of Glendale and its residents. Numerous studies have shown that light rail has the potential to spur economic activity in the area surrounding the location of the line, especially at the light rail stations. As an example, when examining the development surrounding the current rail line that runs through Phoenix, Tempe and Mesa, there has been a significant increase in economic development activity. The Valley Metro Light Rail Economic Development Highlights report from August 2014 notes that nearly 170 projects have been completed, are under construction or planned along the existing light rail system. This translates into an investment of \$6.8 billion in capital to the area, with \$5.4 billion being private sector dollars. Most of the activity is in the commercial and residential sectors.

Not only does activity around light rail increase after the line is put in, but the quality of the economic activity increases as well. For example, light rail has a distinct impact on office rental rates in the area surrounding a light rail station. A recently released research study conducted by the University of Arizona suggests that that a premium on rental rates was detected as far as a mile away from the station. According to national research conducted by Economic Development Research Group, Inc. (EDRG), in a 20-year period of enhanced

transportation investment, the return on investment per billion dollars spent is 3.7:1 or 370%. Although economic impact analysis is still being conducted by Valley Metro, according to initial draft data prepared by Applied Economics, all routes show a net positive impact versus the “no build” alternative. Depending on the route, it is estimated that tax revenues would increase 32-39%, property values would increase 27-30%, employment as compared to normal growth patterns would increase 17-22% and population would increase 9 -14%.

Land Use and Planning

The Glendale City Council first identified the goal of creating an ongoing redevelopment strategy for the Glendale Avenue corridor in 2007, and adopted the Glendale Centerline Overlay District in 2011 as part of a comprehensive land use planning strategy. The key objectives identified by City Council include broadening the view of the downtown, creating a “brand” for the Glendale Avenue corridor, establishing economic partnerships and developing a new core identity for the area. The Glendale Centerline redevelopment area is included in its entirety in the transit corridor study and three-quarters of the defined area are included in the Level 3 analyses that are currently underway. The current connection lines under consideration could have a direct impact on Glendale Centerline properties. A transit-based catalyst for redevelopment is aligned with the City Council’s objectives for the Glendale Centerline area.

In order to determine the potential for development and redevelopment, staff conducted an analysis using CoStar data to examine vacancy rates within the Glendale Centerline area as compared to city-wide vacancy rates for the past 10 years (2005-2014). It is important to note that this database may not include information about all properties or land. In examining the data, properties west of 59th Avenue were excluded as they are outside of the Level 3 focus area. As of 2014, the vacancy rates for office, industrial, retail and multifamily properties in this section of Glendale Centerline were higher than the city’s average vacancy rates with the most significant gap in the retail sector. In addition, there are approximately 92 acres of vacant land in this section of Glendale Centerline that could potentially be impacted by improved transit (14% of the area). The higher Glendale Centerline vacancy rates and the developable land area suggest that the Glendale Centerline area would benefit from transit-oriented development associated with improved transit.

Next Steps

At this stage of the analysis, Valley Metro is continuing their examination of route and design options with an emphasis on reducing the potential for right-of-way acquisition, analyzing traffic circulation and access considerations and assessing economic development and redevelopment potential associated with each of the alternatives. As technical comparison of the remaining options continues, Valley Metro is continuing to engage with stakeholder groups and the public.

From a project management perspective, staff has been researching and meeting with counterparts in other agencies that have successfully implemented an improved transit strategy to identify best practices and lessons learned. A project of this magnitude has significant implications across multiple disciplines for the city. As such, the next steps include adopting a cross-departmental approach to this project to be led by the Transportation Division and supported by the Office of Economic Development and Planning. As work on the project continues, it is anticipated that the core internal project team would be expanded to include representation from other affected departments including Public Safety, Public Works, Development Services and Communications.

In addition, another best practice that has been used successfully by Phoenix, Tempe and Mesa was the development of Community Working Groups for the purpose of creating stakeholder engagement opportunities and to seek a variety of viewpoints as it relates to the transit corridor study. The goal is to seek diverse representation from business owners, property owners and residents in the City of Glendale with a variety of backgrounds to provide feedback, study and develop recommendations. The recommendations from this group would be presented to the greater community for feedback through a series of public meetings. Ultimately, the feedback from the public meetings will be used in the study conclusions to be presented to City Council for consideration regarding the Locally Preferred Alternative (LPA) and mode of transit.

Finally, in the spirit of continuous education and research another best practice is to engage the City Council and organizational leadership in research tours that could include site visits, conferences or symposiums related to transit-oriented development, studying rapid transit or light rail communities, sustainability and urban planning as it relates to transit development, and transit-related community development strategies.

Valley Metro will be continuing technical analysis and public outreach to identify a preliminary LPA later this year. The LPA will include a corridor connecting the existing light rail system along 19th Avenue with downtown Glendale, which may include options for the downtown alignment, if warranted, and the preferred transit mode (light rail or bus rapid transit). Valley Metro will update Council on findings throughout the year with an LPA to be adopted in late 2015 or early 2016.

Previous Related Council Action

At the May 6, 2014 Council Workshop, Valley Metro presented an update on the transit study and the routes under consideration during the first stage of the study. Since then, staff provided two informational memos to City Council: the first in July 2014 (Update Number 3); and the next in October 2014 (Update Number 4) providing updates on the study results that narrowed the route options, as well as an overview of the downtown routes under consideration.

At the October 15, 2013 Council Workshop, staff presented an update on the study with preliminary corridor findings. Valley Metro staff outlined the benefits and impacts of light rail and the steps the city can take to make this a successful project. Staff provided an initial informational memorandum to Council on August 2, 2013, and followed up with two update memos on August 30, 2013 (Update Number 1), and September 11, 2013 (Update Number 2)

At the October 30, 2012 Council Workshop, Transportation Services and Valley Metro staff presented findings from a previous light rail study that stated that the first priority for Glendale light rail should include a corridor to downtown Glendale. City Council directed staff to proceed with the next step in the process, which was to complete an Alternatives Analysis to develop an LPA that identifies a high-capacity transit system best suited for the corridor.

Community Benefit/Public Involvement

Light rail provides a variety of community benefits, from transportation options to creating community investment opportunities. The corridors currently being considered for light rail are among some of the

busiest bus routes in the region. This mode of transportation may not only improve travel for current riders, it could attract new riders who would otherwise drive or may currently opt against bus transit.

Improved options for public transportation are important to a community. Future forecasts show ridership on this corridor will continue to grow, with light rail providing a large number of trips in the area. Research shows many young adults are foregoing car ownership and relying more on public transit. An increase in a senior population more dependent on transportation options adds to the projected increase in ridership.

Light rail also spurs investment in communities, as seen in the region since the opening of the system in Phoenix, Tempe and Mesa. Light rail can be a catalyst for economic redevelopment along a corridor, which in turn supports the tax base of the city through transit-oriented development. The original regional 20-mile light rail “starter segment” cost \$1.4 billion to complete, but the City of Phoenix estimates over \$5 billion in economic investment along the light rail corridor.

Groups such as Urban Land Institute and Smart Growth America have shown that the newest generation of workers places a higher value on connectivity and walkability than previous generations, demonstrating the importance of transit-oriented development as a factor to attracting a workforce into the future. Additionally, light rail helps create destination locations that attract out-of-town visitors, and provides them a means to access these locations.

Environmental benefits include lower levels of pollution due to reduced vehicle use. Light rail can save money for Glendale commuters who choose to use the system, as automobile ownership and related costs are reduced or eliminated. People can drive to the light rail system, park their car and use light rail to access their destination.

The goal of the public involvement process of the Alternatives Analysis is to support the selection and implementation of an LPA through participation of well-informed and involved citizens, the city, businesses and community leaders. The community involvement process outlined by the federal government is designed to ensure that community concerns and issues are identified early and addressed in the planning, engineering, environmental, economic and financial efforts of the project. The public participation process provides a mechanism for the public to receive information and share their comments regarding the project.

The study process has included many opportunities for public input from stakeholders, including citizens and businesses. Valley Metro held initial public meetings in both Glendale and Phoenix, with additional meetings to be scheduled throughout the remainder of the process. To date, public input has been received from over 30 outreach events in Glendale. The next scheduled Glendale public meeting is tentatively planned for April 2015.

Budget and Financial Impacts

The Alternatives Analysis is funded with regional public transportation funds and therefore does not impact the current Glendale budget.