

Met Council OKs \$1.2M to fight rail-line disruption

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Facing complaints about light-rail construction disrupting St. Paul businesses, the government agency overseeing the project is preparing to spend \$1.2 million on a marketing campaign to entice shoppers to visit the beleaguered area.

It calls for "strategies that drive customer traffic" to businesses along the future Central Corridor line "by raising awareness of the diversity of ... businesses and highlighting that they are accessible, safe and worth visiting." The campaign has drawn criticism from some who see it as an odd expenditure at a time when the agency, the Metropolitan Council, has complained of budget shortfalls and raised property taxes.

"They seem not to have any trouble finding the money," said Rep. Michael Beard, R-Shakopee, chairman of the House Transportation Policy and Finance Committee.

Another critic, Tad DeHaven, a budget analyst for the Cato Institute, questioned the use of federal and state transit money to influence local shopping decisions.

But supporters of the campaign say it's in line with federal transit requirements to mitigate the impact of construction, and has precedents elsewhere in the nation.

"Other rail projects have provided business promotional programs," said Metropolitan Council spokeswoman Meredith Salsbery, noting campaigns during transit construction in Phoenix and Salt Lake City.

Council Member Jon Commers said the campaign is needed to spread the word that the businesses are open.

"The key is to try to get that message to puncture through concerns about ... the fact you need to find new places to park ... or there have been intersections that are closed at different times," said Commers, who runs a consulting business that overlooks light-rail construction on W. University Avenue. He was among council members voting for the campaign, but said his support did not represent a conflict because his business doesn't rely on walk-in customers as retailers do.

The marketing campaign is intended to boost support for businesses adjacent to construction along the 11-mile corridor, which runs from downtown Minneapolis to downtown St. Paul. Some merchants have complained that road and sidewalk work deprived potential customers of easy access to their stores and parking.

Work completed in November restored traffic lanes on a three-mile stretch of University, making the businesses more accessible. Disruptions continue in downtown St. Paul and elsewhere.

Businesses weigh in

Whether a marketing campaign would be of much help was unclear Monday to some businesses along University.

At Bonnie's Cafe, a popular diner just east of Vandalia Street, veteran waitress Maureen Barry said the restaurant relies mostly on area residents and other loyal customers who already know about access. Bonnie's was among businesses that regained traffic lanes late last year.

Barry said advertising "never paid off in the past." Instead, a sign inside implores: "If you are having a good experience at Bonnie's you may be able to help us survive this ... construction and the mess it is making in our area. Please mention us to your Facebook friends."

Further east on University, Marty's Second Hand Store is in the path of future construction. Owner Gilbert Marty was skeptical of the impact of the promotion plan, fearing it wouldn't overcome loss of parking.

"The side streets here aren't safe," Marty said. "You park over there, you might get mugged."

But John Nguyen, a manager at Hoa Bien Vietnamese restaurant, was more sanguine about the effect of the marketing campaign. "It will help, probably, draw customers who haven't been in the area," he said. The restaurant has a large parking lot along University, and Nguyen said it will remove fencing to allow access from the rear alley.

Some businesses and residents sought federal court action last year to force a better study of the impact of the construction. A judge is expected to rule soon on the request.

Campaign to start in March

The Met Council expects to award the marketing contract this month. The campaign will begin in March and continue for two years during and immediately after construction.

The request for proposals notes that the businesses face challenges because nearly 25 percent of households within half a mile of the line qualify as low-income.

The St. Paul Area Chamber of Commerce, the Midway Chamber of Commerce and Metro Transit -- operated by the Met Council -- also have promoted the corridor.

The \$1.2 million from the Met Council will come from a Central Corridor light-rail contingency fund, provided by federal, state and Twin Cities county governments. The campaign will include "a multi-level approach that markets the entire corridor to the metro region."

Beard noted that the spending on marketing for the Central Corridor comes months after the Met Council struggled to find money to operate a future rapid bus service on Cedar Avenue following a state cut in funding. Two weeks ago the council raised property taxes 2 percent to bolster reserves and provide more money for general expenses.

Salsbery said the contingency money must be spent only on the Central Corridor project, and that the council launched the campaign at the urging of the St. Paul Area Chamber of Commerce.

"Instead of adding to further enhancements of the project ... we thought first and foremost it should be considered for something ... to aid the businesses that are already there," said Zach Schwartz, a chamber spokesman.

A public relations component of the campaign will "address perceptions of the impact of construction on businesses that are reflected in or created by Twin Cities media," according to the request for proposals.

Jason Cao, a professor at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs who specializes in the impact of transportation on urban development, applauded the marketing campaign. "This kind of activity is very important for the survival of the businesses," he said.

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