

Bottineau Transitway HIA Public Comment Report

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Introduction

The public was invited to provide feedback on the draft Bottineau Transitway Health Impact Assessment (HIA) beginning on July 15, 2013. The original public comment period was set to end September 15, 2013 but was extended to September 27th in response to requests from community members. County HIA staff reviewed all comments and made adjustments to the Bottineau Transitway HIA Final Report where possible. This public comment report summarizes and responds to comments about the HIA collected during the public review period. More information about the Bottineau Transitway HIA findings and process can be found in the Bottineau Transitway HIA Final Report online at: <http://www.hennepin.us/bottineauhia>.

There will be many more opportunities for the public to participate in activities regarding the Bottineau Transitway. In particular, the public will have the opportunity to provide comments on the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (Draft EIS) in 2014. As the Draft EIS release date and public comment period are established, dates and information on Draft EIS document accessibility will be broadcast via a broad range of media, including the Bottineau Transitway website: <http://www.bottineautransitway.org>.

The HIA is only the beginning of the health and equity related community engagement. Hennepin County hired a new planner and is partnering with the nonprofit Nexus Community Partners to ensure residents who live along the line have opportunities for meaningful participation in the station area planning process.

Summary Findings

The HIA increased stakeholders' understanding of connections among health, land use, and transit

A major goal of the HIA was to inform stakeholders about how land uses and transit impact people's health. Responses during the public comment period provide evidence that the HIA did succeed in informing those who read the report or summary about these connections.

The Bottineau Corridor includes a diverse population with wide-ranging interests

The public input collected during the HIA public comment period underscores that Bottineau Transitway stakeholders have diverse concerns and interests regarding the transitway. The most common topics of importance were physical activity, land use, location affordability (combined housing and transportation costs), employment access, and traffic safety.

Public Comment process overview

Distribution

The full draft report, in addition to report summaries in English, Spanish, Somali, Hmong, and Lao, were available online on the HIA web page on Hennepin County's website. Paper copies of the full report and the report summary were placed at the Golden Valley, Brookdale, Brooklyn Park, Sumner, and Rockford

Road libraries, as well as at the Brooklyn Park, Crystal, Robbinsdale, and Golden Valley city halls. Copies were also available at the Harrison Neighborhood Association, Heritage Park Neighborhood Association, Northpoint Health and Wellness Center, and North Hennepin Community College.

A Hennepin County press release went out July 17, 2013 that announced the public review period. Several local newspapers including the Golden Valley Patch, the Africa Paper, and the Sun Post wrote follow up articles within the first few days of the announcement, and the Bottineau HIA Advisory Committee members sent out the announcement to their networks in July. Other groups involved in the transitway did the same.

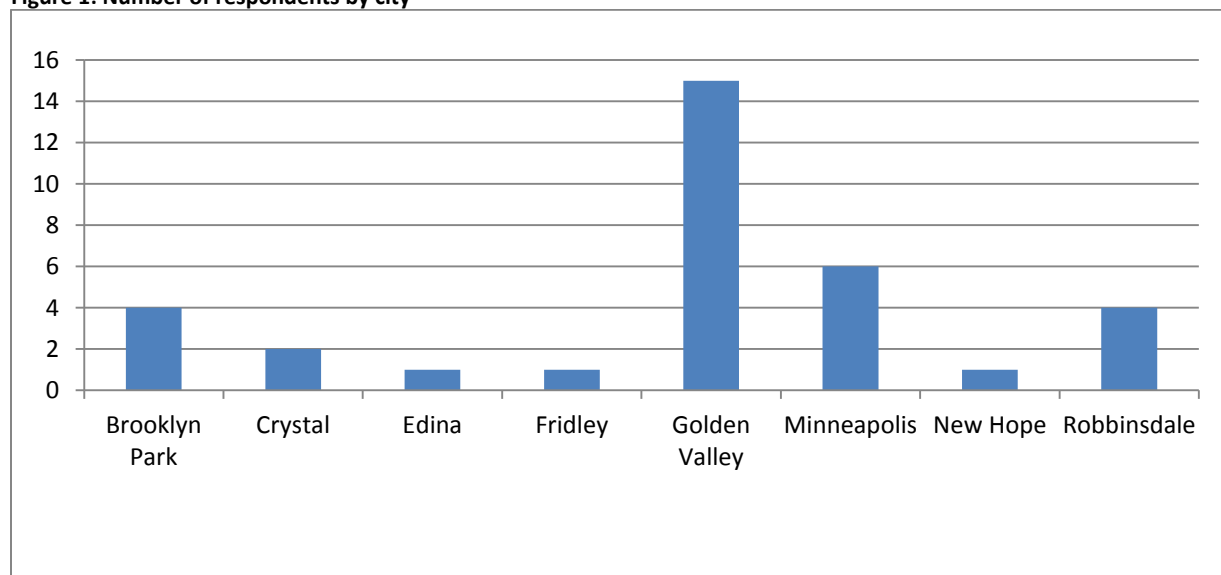
Comment methods and response rates

At the request of the HIA Advisory Committee, the Hennepin County HIA team developed a comment form that included a set of questions and a space for open-ended comments in order to assist the public in providing input. Additionally, an HIA team member was designated to be available by phone to help people provide comments. The public had multiple options for submitting comments and feedback on the report. These included:

- Online – respondents could submit comments online through Survey Monkey, the online survey tool.
- Paper survey – respondents could fill out surveys and leave them at the libraries where the reports were placed.
- Phone – respondents could call in and give their comments verbally to a designated Hennepin County staff person.
- Email – respondents could send in comments by email.

Some people provided comments using more than one of these methods. Additionally, the 2012-13 Humphrey Policy Fellows: Reshaping the Conversation on Transit Development submitted their comments in the form of a report. In total, 48 people submitted comments in at least one format. Of these respondents, 35 identified where they live. There was an overrepresentation of residents from Golden Valley (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Number of respondents by city



Findings from Public Comments

Increased understanding of the connections between health, land use, and transit

A major goal of the HIA was to educate stakeholders about the connections among health, land use, and transit. Responses submitted during the public comment period provide evidence that the HIA was effective in informing stakeholders who read the report about these connections.

The first question on the comment form asked, “After reviewing this report, did you have a better understanding of how transit and land uses can impact your health and/or the health of communities living near the Bottineau Transitway?” Of the 32 people who completed the question, 28 (87.5%) indicated that the report did increase their understanding of how transit and land uses can impact health. People commented that they found the graphs helpful and that the report brought to light less known ways transit is linked to health, including increasing opportunities for physical activity, reducing stress (which has mental health benefits), providing access to education, and connecting residents to health services.

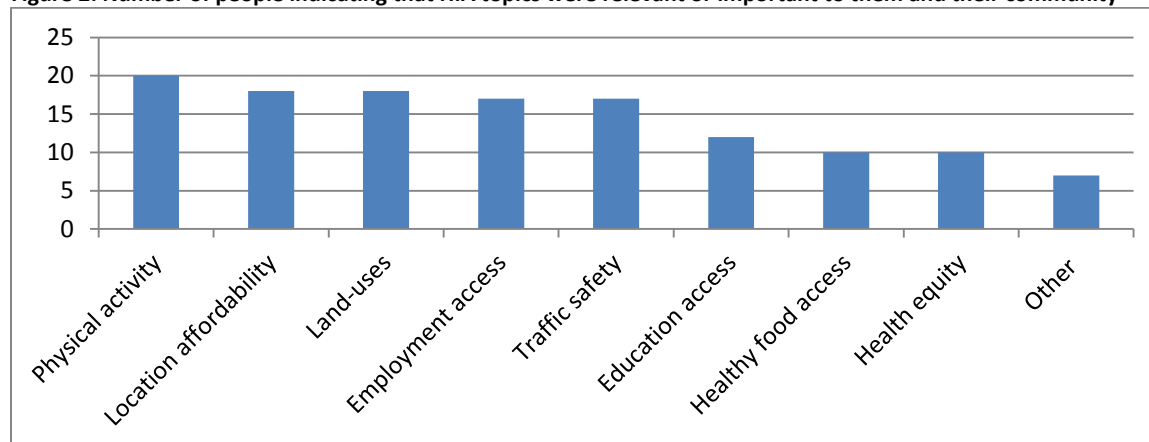
Three of the four people who reported they did not have a better understanding of the links between health, transit, and land use from reading the report expressed opposition to the route going through Golden Valley and concerns about impacts to Theodore Wirth Park. The fourth person expressed opposition to government spending on transit.

Representation of community priorities and experiences

Public comments indicated that the issues covered in the HIA reflect the priorities and experiences of some community members. Overall, the comments indicate that project stakeholders have a wide range of interests, needs, and concerns. The geographic scope of the Bottineau Transitway and the diverse characteristics of the large population and land uses in the corridor presented an ongoing challenge in terms of covering all possible categories during the HIA process.

The HIA survey asked, “What topics in this report are the most relevant or important to you and/or your community and why?” Of those who completed the form, the most common topics of importance were physical activity, land use, location affordability (combined housing and transportation costs), employment access, and traffic safety (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Number of people indicating that HIA topics were relevant or important to them and their community



Note: Respondents had the option to list more than one topic

The public comments show that numerous other issues and topics related to community health are also important to residents and stakeholders. Many of these topics were covered in the HIA. The table on page 4 (below) lists issues and topics noted in public comments, the number of people who mentioned the topics and issues, and whether they are covered in the HIA.

Other issues and topics related to community health that were noted in public comments	# of people who mentioned this topic or issue	Topic is covered in the HIA
Access to cultural events/institutions - LRT increases access	1	No
Bicycle safety / Bikeability	3	Yes
Convenience - station within walking distance	4	No
Cost of riding LRT	1	No
Crime	2	Yes
Economic development	4	Yes
Environmental concerns	6	Partially; only air pollution is covered
Feeder buses - need to help increase access to LRT	1	Yes
Gentrification	1	Yes
Medical services - LRT allows access to	2	No
Mental health benefits	1	No
No car households - need reliable public transit	3	Yes
Noise, concern that LRT will cause	3	Yes
Property values - concerns that values will increase	2	Yes
Reducing reliance on cars	2	Yes
Reducing air pollution	4	Yes
Reliability of transit	3	No
Senior citizen concerns	2	Partially
Traffic congestion, LRT reduces it	2	No
Traffic congestion, LRT stations cause it	1	No
Walkability	1	Yes
Youth - LRT promotes independence	1	No

The third question of the comment form asked, *“Do the findings and recommendations in this report reflect your priorities and experiences?”* Out of the 29 people who answered this question, 16 people answered that the HIA did reflect their priorities and experiences. Several people wrote about the importance of having *reliable* public transportation for those who cannot afford cars or choose not to have cars, especially given Minnesota’s harsh winters. People felt that the LRT would be an improvement over bus service, which they felt was unreliable at times. Another person commented that the LRT would improve access to housing and employment. Others talked about how taking public transportation saves them money in parking, car maintenance, and gas costs.

Three people indicated that the report partially represented their priorities and experiences and ten people said that the report did not reflect their priorities. Two major priorities related to health that people felt were left out of the report were the transitway health-related impacts on bicycling (3 people) and crime (2 people). Some people wrote that they felt the report focused on health issues for low income neighborhoods and did not address health concerns of wealthier neighborhoods. These issues are addressed in the final version of the HIA report.

Humphrey Policy Fellows recommendations to advance health equity

The Humphrey Policy Fellows convened and facilitated three focus groups and developed recommendations for the next stages of the transitway development based on their findings:

1. Increased inclusive and transparent process;
2. Intentional strategy and planning related to gentrification with specific incentives;
3. A clearer emphasis on engaging traditional and non-traditional partners;
4. Educating vulnerable and affected community regarding data, analysis and interpretation; and
5. Developing a shared definition of equity.

Hennepin County staff is already working to incorporate these strategies into the station area planning phase for Bottineau Transitway.

Changes made to the report

Based on the comments received, the HIA team made updates to the HIA full report and summary report where possible. The primary changes include the following:

1. The team rewrote the summary report and the executive summary and introduction sections of the full report to make the language more concise and clear with the goal of improving readability and emphasizing key points;
2. The full report now notes that members of the public submitted comments expressing concerns regarding crime, noise and vibration;
3. The air quality section was expanded; and
4. Clarifications regarding neighborhoods' differing needs were made in the recommendations section.

HIA Team responses to key concerns

Bicycling

The report discusses bicycling in the traffic safety and physical activity sections. The HIA focuses more heavily on walking in the physical activity section because (1) walking is more popular and accessible to a broader range of the public, and (2) impact of transit on walking is supported by more research. While bicycling is a critical and growing part of our transportation system, the resources were not available for primary data collection on the impacts of transit on bicycling.

Crime

The report briefly covers concerns regarding the Transitway's potential impact on crime. As noted in the final HIA report, "Input from stakeholders in public comments during DEIS scoping, public comments during the HIA comment period, and stakeholder engagement activities point to concerns regarding crime and personal safety related to transit. Some public comments and stakeholder input brought up concerns about personal safety while waiting at stations, people walking to and from stations alone, and

gang activity in cities along the Bottineau Corridor. Others expressed concerns that the transitway would bring crime to their neighborhoods. Crime and lack of personal safety can impact health both directly in the form of injury and death, and indirectly through inhibiting residents from participating in physical activity outdoors and riding transit.

There is limited evidence from previous studies that public transit alone serves to decrease or increase crime and personal safety. However, existing crime levels may inhibit some potential would-be transit riders from using and benefiting from the new transitway. Safety features such as lighting, security cameras, emergency telephones, increased ridership, and high frequency of the transit service could serve to mitigate crime and increase personal safety.”

Low-income populations and health

Equity is a key principle of the HIA practice and the HIA practice standards hold that the HIA practitioner should consider how the project being assessed could disproportionately impact some populations. Currently low-income populations in Hennepin County experience higher rates of chronic and preventable illnesses than do their counterparts who are not low-income. It is therefore important when examining health impacts of the transitway to consider impacts to low-income populations. The HIA does not focus exclusively on low-income populations but considers opportunities for ensuring that low-income populations do benefit from the project.

Senior Citizens and Public Transportation

A number of respondents noted that public transportation options are very important for senior citizens, who may be less comfortable driving or unable to drive. One person commented, “Accessible transportation can keep seniors active longer. It can connect them to medical providers [and] can keep them out in the larger community.” Another person noted that they would like to see a senior housing complex in Brooklyn Park within walking distance of an LRT station. The Bottineau HIA includes senior citizens in the list of “vulnerable populations” who may be disproportionately influenced by the LRT and recommends that further study be done to ensure that the LRT has the best possible impact on the health of these populations. For senior citizens, this could include strong pedestrian infrastructure, including benches and ramps, and zoning for mixed uses along the line, including senior housing and medical services.

Concerns regarding the HIA public engagement process

The public comment period was not the only method used to incorporate public input into the HIA. The Bottineau HIA process also included stakeholder input gathered through multiple methods: an Advisory Committee, focus groups with residents and topical experts from throughout the Bottineau Corridor, stakeholder interviews, a survey of North Hennepin Community College students, and a review of public input on transportation and health issues gathered through public input processes during other projects and studies.

Opposition to the transitway project

Several comments expressed opposition to the overall Bottineau Transitway report rather than feedback on the HIA report. The HIA team is only handling questions and comments regarding the HIA.

Answers to questions submitted in during comment period

Q. Nationally, an estimated 29 percent of transit users get 30 minutes or more (average 24 minutes) of physical activity per weekday solely by walking to and from transit. Why would we make metro transit

harder for people to get to? Shouldn't these stations be placed more in the areas of people who are downtown commuters so they do not have to drive to the stations? Or walk?

A. The finding that when people use transit they tend to be more active does not suggest that transit stations should be purposefully located farther from residential areas in order to make people walk longer distances. The HIA studied physical activity because research shows that when people have access to high quality public transportation, along with safe infrastructure including sidewalks and crosswalks, they are more easily able to incorporate walking and biking into their daily routines. In areas where public transportation is lacking and sidewalks are insufficient, people tend to be more sedentary and walk or bike less because they need to drive most places. In recommendation #5, the HIA suggests that corridor cities, as well as Hennepin County, should focus on bicycle and pedestrian infrastructure improvements in order to make walking and bicycling to transit stations safe and appealing.

Q. ...it seems as if the study was done backwards. All of the benefits described in the report seem to be secondary benefits that may or may not occur. A better way to do the study would be to start with the actual goals of the project. WHY is the project even being discussed? Employment and education access are perhaps a part of it, but some of the other things seem merely like justifications for an already decided-on project.

A. Before the HIA began, Hennepin County, in partnership with corridor cities, did an extensive analysis of the need for the transitway, including an Alternatives Analysis Study that looked at different ways to serve the transit needs of the region. These studies took place between 2008 and 2010 and are available on the Bottineau Transitway website under "Project Library": http://www.bottineautransitway.org/project_library.htm.

Additionally, in early 2014 the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (Draft EIS) will be made available for public review. The Draft EIS contains information about possible environmental consequences of the LRT, including comparisons to different alignments and alternatives. The purpose of the HIA was to look at transit from a health perspective because human health was not a focus of these earlier studies.

Q. We are concerned about increased traffic in our neighborhoods - especially on the already busy Golden Valley Road - which decreases the safety and mobility of our residents. We do not have sidewalks to separate pedestrians, bikes and cars.

A. This comment highlights the need for high quality pedestrian infrastructure in station areas. The HIA recommends having strong pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure in order to protect the safety and mobility of residents. This could include wide sidewalks and clearly marked crosswalks for pedestrians, designated lanes for bikes, and traffic calming devices to keep traffic at safe speeds and moving smoothly.

Q. I like low-density, country-like living. It appears the goal of the transitway is to "encourage higher density, mixed-use development" to areas that were designated as single home residential.

A. The HIA describes the health benefits of mixed-use, walkable neighborhoods but does not suggest high density land uses will be appropriate everywhere. The HIA is a tool to help stakeholders make decisions but land use decisions will be made by individual cities. The recommendations section of the HIA has been updated to clarify that the neighborhoods along the transitway are diverse and therefore will have different needs. For this reason, not all recommendations will apply to every neighborhood.

Q: "I was looking more for [the report] to explain the noise, disturbance to wildlife, land usage, and effects on home values. I didn't think the impact would have focused on the low income or homeless."

The Draft Environmental Impact Statement (Draft EIS), which will be released in the first quarter of 2014, will address topics such as noise and disturbance to wildlife in great depth. This HIA was intended to cover topics that will not be covered by the Draft EIS. The Draft EIS will have a 60-day public comment period once it is released and we encourage residents to submit their comments regarding environmental, noise, and other related concerns during that process. For updates, visit www.bottineautransitway.org

Next Steps

Information and recommendations from the Bottineau HIA as well as public comments submitted will be used to inform future planning of the Bottineau Transitway and station areas. As noted above, this HIA is only the beginning of the health and equity related community engagement that will be conducted around the Bottineau Transitway. There will be many upcoming opportunities for community participation on the Bottineau Transitway development and station area planning process.