

City Council gives green light to proposed I-35W improvements

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The BRT station planned for I-35W south of downtown. File image

The City Council granted municipal consent Friday for a series of major construction projects on I-35W, including adding a new bus rapid transit (BRT) station in the median of the freeway at Lake Street for the proposed Orange Line linking Burnsville with downtown Minneapolis.

In addition to the transit station, the \$150.2 million I-35W Transit/Access Project includes a new bicycle/pedestrian connection to the Midtown Greenway, a new southbound exit ramp to Lake Street and a new northbound exit ramp to 28th Street.

Other major work lined up for the corridor includes the replacement of the I-35W “braid” and “flyover” bridges connecting northbound I-35W to I-94 westbound. MnDOT is also planning to replace pavement on I-35W between 42nd and 32nd streets, replace the 40th Street Pedestrian Bridge and rehab the 38th Street bridge.

The budget total for the massive constructive work is roughly \$345 million. Project planners are trying to secure the remainder of funding needed before the 2016 legislative session wraps up May 23.

The goal is to condense the construction schedule to four years to minimize the headaches for neighbors of the project and commuters.

The improvements planned for I-35W are many years in the making. The City Council passed a “reboot resolution” in 2007 to ensure the corridor would place a priority on transit.

City Council Member Elizabeth Glidden (Ward 8) called Lake Street a “lynchpin” for the Orange Line. She predicted the BRT line will be highly successful and urged legislators to pass additional funding for the project so construction doesn’t drag out beyond four years.

The BRT station in the median of I-35W at Lake Street is expected to serve 90-100 buses during peak traffic times during the week.

Peter Wagenius, policy director for Mayor Betsy Hodges, commended the City Council — past and present members — for advocating for transit on the corridor to ensure it won’t just be a “funnel for cars.”

“We’ve turned controversy into consensus,” he said of the years of planning work on the planned improvements.

At a public hearing before the Council’s Transportation and Public Works Committee, Michael Wilson, a member of the Midtown Greenway Coalition’s board of director, said he’s excited to see all of the work moving forward, but called for improvements for the Lake Street transit station area under the freeway.

He said he feared the city will have another example of “Minneapolis dreary” if project planners fail to come up with a better plan for the area.

Some have compared the station to the Lake Street-Hiawatha intersection, which has been criticized for being dark and not friendly for pedestrians and cyclists.

Hennepin County engineer Jim Grube told Council members that there’s still time to make design improvements to the station area to address community concerns.

Pending final approvals, construction is expected to start in 2017 on the improvement projects.