



**Missoula Urban Transportation District
Planning Committee Meeting Minutes
September 11, 2024**

APPROVED

MEMBERS PRESENT

Sebastian Strauss
Jason Wiener
Amy Cilimburg
Sam Oliver
Don MacArthur

MEMBERS ABSENT

STAFF

Jordan Hess
Colin Woodrow
Garin Wally
Frank Kuhl
Spencer Starke
Olga Kreimer

Guests

Kyle Taniguchi, Nelson\Nygaard
Thomas Whittman, Nelson\Nygaard
Annette Marchesseault, Missoula Midtown Association, Missoula Redevelopment Agency
Chris Proud, HDR
Yelena Onnen, HDR

Call to Order and Roll Call

11:01 a.m. – MacArthur called the meeting to order and asked for roll call.

Changes or Additions to the Agenda

No changes or additions to the agenda.

Public Comment on Items Not on the Agenda

None

Action Items

4.1 Minutes of July 10, 2024, Meeting – Cilimburg requested a revision noting that MacArthur was present at the July meeting. She motioned for approval with that revision, Oliver seconded, and the motion passed unanimously.

Discussion Items

5.1 Transform Brooks-Connect Midtown-Engage Missoula Update – Woodrow gave a brief overview of the RAISE grant project, emphasizing that MUTD has fiduciary responsibility for the grant. The project design team is working on a 15 percent conceptual design. Proud related that the project is making progress regarding the operational mode and additional analysis while there is due diligence yet to be done. Concept finalization is still in a working phase. Developing high level cost estimates and funding opportunities can be defined once the operational design has

been finalized. To ensure compliance, engagement with stakeholders and regulatory bodies continues.

Proud said a potential endpoint near Southgate Mall has been identified but it is vital to integrate any bus rapid transit routes with the broader transit network. Various design options that validate assumptions from the feasibility study are being explored. Those design options include center and side running configurations, travel lanes, pedestrian and landscape zones, snow storage and physical separation at station locations. A tentative schedule has been set: late fall/early winter – reporting on recommendations; early spring 2025 – finalize configuration and proceed with design.

MacArthur asked if the rights of way were sufficient to install bus rapid transit stops (BRT) and observed that the current street widths do not accommodate a BRT system. Proud confirmed that was the concept and emphasized the need for BRT terminus start and endpoints. He added that the MUTD board's engagement is a vital component of the decision-making process.

Wiener asked whether the southern terminus at the mall precluded running the BRT all the way to Walmart or Blue Mountain Road in the future. Woodrow confirmed the primary BRT line would run primarily through the Midtown area, but feeder lines could be extended in the future. He added that a successful BRT route needs strong endpoints. Because the ridership to the mall is stronger and there is land available close to it, it made sense to establish the end point there.

Strauss pointed out that if the BRT route is along Stephens without a designated priority lane, it would not be any faster than driving a car. He asked if there was a comparison showing how BRT would improve service. Improving service to make BRT appealing, Proud said, requires more frequency and more buses. Woodrow said that coordination with the City of Missoula and Montana Department of Transportation will ensure the greatest efficiency, regardless of the configuration.

MacArthur asked if the board would be able to make decisions on configuration, the southern terminus and other issues. Woodrow responded that the board's feedback is vital to the process of deciding what is transformative and what creates the strongest system and agency while staying operationally feasible. A scope change regarding the running configuration is required before another detailed discussion is practical. Proud said that both running configurations can and have worked in other cities but whether it will work in Missoula is yet to be determined. Strauss asked for a comparison of BRT ridership versus current ridership and how BRT would incrementally improve ridership. MacArthur said BRT could spur appropriate development patterns. Marchessault concurred and added that transit-oriented development is also a goal for the BRT project.

5.2 Strategic Plan Update – Starke said a special board meeting needs to be scheduled for one more opportunity to decide on two alternative route change scenarios and establish a long-range vision. He introduced Whittman who said that strategic planning is set to end in December 2024. Whittman reviewed MUTD's achievements since the last strategic plan was initiated – extended service – and pointed out that post-pandemic ridership and travel patterns have changed, revealing new opportunities. On-demand services and limitations on increasing fleet size and frequency also were addressed.

Whittman stated service on underserved fixed routes could be resolved by implementing on-demand transit service, though passengers would be required to make more transfers. He introduced two different alternatives for maintaining coverage within budget – one focuses on

greater frequency in the developing neighborhoods and the other depicts on-demand transit services in lieu of routes where ridership is low. Each scenario addressed tradeoffs between job accessibility and the number of people served. On demand would increase access to higher quality service and low-wage jobs, while the other focuses primarily on weekend accessibility for high-need areas. Specifically, the South Hills, Pattee Canyon and South Hills areas could be better served by on-demand service that runs all day instead of just at peak times. Minor changes to other routes would be required to minimize the overlap with the university's bus service. A new route along Mullan Road to accommodate the continuing housing development was also suggested.

MacArthur voiced his dissatisfaction with a recent media article that conveyed these alternatives in a negative light. Hess added that the article provided information without the proper context. MacArthur requested that the board be included in the planning and be apprised before the public is informed.

Strauss asked for clarification on bus route coverage and overlap while Wiener expressed concern that one route was not slated for any change despite its underperformance. Starke explained that cost considerations and the need for continued service dictated the route would not be changed. MacArthur asked when the new Mullan Road route would be implemented based on anticipated revenue. Whittman responded that receiving tax revenue hinges on many variables, including when the subdivisions are completed and actually start generating property taxes. Hess suggested that the board would have to decide on a policy for transit services that dictates when to provide service to developing areas. MacArthur asked to see calculations regarding the cost of new service in the developing areas based on anticipated revenue from those subdivisions. Strauss asked if a Mullan Road route would be a viable option if walkability improvements were added into the subdivisions. Starke said the City of Missoula has invested in the area with improvements, but not sidewalks specifically. Strauss followed up with a suggestion that MUTD be able to influence the developers through committing to service in the subdivisions based on anticipated tax revenue. Starke responded that the current subdivision petition process needs changing and the Missoula Metropolitan Organization (MPO) is working with the city to streamline process. Strauss suggested leveraging MUTD's relationship with the mayor to change development priorities.

MacArthur raised concerns about the risks and timelines of implementation on-demand service. Whittman recommended launching a pilot program within one specific area. He cautioned that on-demand service usually results in the program becoming too successful or no one uses it at all. Overall, the public preferred on-demand service based on convenience and point-to-point service. The potential drawbacks are the program costing more in areas where ridership was low and not having set origins and destinations within the designated zones.

MacArthur asked what the savings were. Whittman said that one on-demand vehicle serving a zone could fund up to ten hours of fixed-route service somewhere else on the network. Establishing on-demand as a premium service with a minimal charge would allow more control on the demand. On-demand services are intended for short first/last mile trips to a connecting service. Hess suggested that incorporating premium pricing into paratransit service for those riders who want to schedule thirty minutes out instead of the required 24-hour window could be an option. MacArthur pointed out that charging for a service that was free while paying taxes for that service could be potentially unpopular.

Wiener observed that self-driving vehicles in ride sharing needs to be considered. He asked when a decision about the alternatives presented was needed. Starke replied that the board would need

to decide on an alternative at the October special board meeting. Woodrow said the goal for today's meeting is to get the board's feedback on implementing on-demand service. MacArthur said that on-demand service should enhance existing routes without cutting service. A one-year pilot program with minimal investment might be a possible scenario but the figures presented in the alternatives did not show a big cost savings. Whittman responded that reducing service duplication, reallocating resources to higher frequency and introducing new service will cause a net gain in ridership. Also, the growing development areas can support higher service levels than the current hourly headways. Cilimburg noted the numbers reflected possibilities, not actual real time data.

MacArthur asked if there was data to show how much each new unit under construction would need to pay in property taxes to improve the service. Woodrow replied it's hard to know projected revenue versus what is platted and then if or when it is actually built. Hess noted there is a positive relationship between the tax base and transit effectiveness. Starke pointed out that service becomes exponentially more expensive the further out it goes.

Starke clarified that a special board meeting in October would decide the board's preference for the presented alternatives, followed by phase three community engagement to gauge public feedback. Woodrow added that the special meeting will require some policy decisions regarding the preferred alternative and implementation timelines.

Adjournment

2:28 p.m. – MacArthur adjourned the meeting.

Submitted by Darlene Craven, Board Clerk