

FOR THE EXCLUSIVE USE OF MPFEIFER@BIZJOURNALS.COM

From the Portland Business Journal:

<https://www.bizjournals.com/portland/news/2020/08/13/inside-plans-to-make-the-sw-corridor-max-line-a-m.html>

All aboard: Inside plans to make the SW Corridor MAX line a model in equitable transit development

Aug 13, 2020, 11:13am PDT **Updated: Aug 13, 2020, 1:41pm PDT**

On a Saturday afternoon in June 2019, Mohamed Bahamadi led representatives from the city of Portland on a walking tour along Southwest Capitol Highway. Along the way, he shared stories of daily life for the neighborhood's East African community.

Bahamadi is the founder of Haki Community Organization, a resource for African immigrants and an advocate for renters rights and tenant education. He's been working with the city in an effort to preserve homes and affordable transit fares for low-income and working families in the SW Corridor, where a new MAX light rail line is planned.

In recounting the tour later, Bahamadi said he told the group that community members walk to the local mosque together, they eat together, wait for their children to return from school together.

"If (new development) displaces us, and keeps us away from each other, that would be very hard to adapt to," he said.

It's a valid concern. Transit-oriented urban renewal projects nationwide have often prioritized the promise of new development and traffic flow over the needs and



CATHY CHENEY|@PORTLAND BUSINESS JOURNAL

Nuhamin Eiden at the Barbur Boulevard Transit Station one of the stops of the new Tri-met light rail SW Corridor Project.

rights of local citizens — particularly Black, Indigenous, people of color.

Displacement is what TriMet, Metro and an array of community partners want to avoid as plans for the \$2.8 billion SW Corridor MAX line barrel ahead. The line would include 11 miles of track and 13 stations. An extension of the Green Line, the SW MAX would transport riders from downtown Portland to Bridgeport Village in Tualatin in 30 minutes.

If all goes as planned, construction would begin in 2022 and be completed by September 2027.

There are roadblocks, including a challenge to a November ballot measure that would raise \$5 billion, some of which would be earmarked for the new rail line. For now, though, the project remains on track, and the focus is on keeping social justice at its center.

The aim is to make it a model for equitable transit-oriented development, one that can deliver economic benefits without displacing residents. To help accomplish that, TriMet and Metro formed the SW Equity Coalition to promote community-driven decision making on infrastructure improvements, affordable housing and more.

“There has been a very intentional consideration about potential displacement on this project, more so than any other,” Jennifer Koozer, TriMet community affairs manager, said. “So it’s really a joint effort of all of the project partners working on this equitable development strategy.”

It won’t be easy. Portland transit-oriented development has a checkered history. Look no further than the demolition of the Albina neighborhood to make way for I-5, or the Yellow Line along Interstate Avenue, which increased property values to the point that many lower income residents and businesses were forced out.

“I think having the (SW Equity Coalition) that clearly states that these development decisions in the past have harmed communities and that we want to make sure that’s not the case in the SW Corridor (is important),” said Nuhamin Eiden, equity coalition manager at the social justice advocacy organization Unite Oregon and a member of the SWEC. “The way that we can do it differently is to center all decision

making on racial justice and economic justice, and that centering happens when we center on the people that live here.”

A HISTORY OF DISPLACEMENT

In the 1950s, Portland’s Albina neighborhood was the cultural heart for the city’s Black community. The freeway boom of the next decade destroyed that.

The path for I-5 snaked directly through the neighborhood. Hundreds of homes were destroyed, property values plummeted and former residents were forced out.

A [2017 analysis](#) by the Digital Scholarship Lab at the University of Richmond estimated 600 families were displaced by urban renewal projects in Portland in the ‘50s and ‘60s, specifically in the Albina neighborhood.

In a [2007 case study](#) of the neighborhood, Portland State University Associate Professor of Urban Studies and Planning [Karen Gibson](#) wrote that as property values declined, developers pounced.

“Combined with more aggressive building code enforcement and the creation of a huge urban renewal district and light-rail project on Interstate Avenue, the area was primed for reinvestment,” Gibson wrote. “The gap between the value of properties and what they could potentially earn was large enough for speculators to line up to buy tax-foreclosed properties in Albina.”

When the Yellow Line became a reality in 2004, property values rose along Interstate and more low-income families and businesses were displaced.

According to U.S. census data, between 2000 and 2010, the Overlook neighborhood, which is closest to the Yellow Line, saw a more than 33 percent decrease in Black residents and the nearby Piedmont neighborhood’s Black population declined by more than 20 percent.

The risk of continued displacement is high. A [2018 gentrification study](#) by the City of Portland found that almost 34,000 households were at risk of being displaced and regulated affordable housing was not available or planned in at-risk areas.

“The Interstate and MLK Corridor has continued to gentrify into late stages, having lost thousands of vulnerable residents. More than 1,700 residents of color have

been displaced since 2010, and low income households have also dropped,” according to the report. “The (area) was experiencing mid-stage gentrification between 2000 and 2010, but almost the entire corridor has moved into later stages where home values are high and vulnerable populations have been displaced.”

The SWEC is using data from past projects and input from residents to guard against similar ill effects with the SW Corridor MAX.

“There’s been all-good intentions on previous projects,” [Brian Harper](#), senior regional planner for Metro, said of the Yellow Line and Orange Line, which runs to Milwaukie. “But (planners) were unwilling to ask the (difficult) questions before they did it, and that’s what we’re trying to change. Let’s ask some tough questions, let’s have some tough conversations, let’s be in a room with a lot of different viewpoints.”

AN INCLUSIVE APPROACH

In October 2019, Metro released its Southwest Equitable Development Strategy.

The report, which built on years of discussions between government agencies and citizens, outlines the regional government’s desire for development that promotes inclusivity and livability and that sparks investment in a diverse range of housing meant to empower rather than marginalize existing populations.

The SW Equity Coalition is an important piece of that strategy.

The coalition includes representatives from Metro and TriMet, as well as members of community advocacy groups and economic development agencies including Neighborhood House, Unite Oregon, Haki Community Organization, Prosper Portland and Greater Portland Inc.

The group first officially met as a part of SWEC in April and continues to meet virtually monthly.

The coalition has listened to community concerns and worked with local nonprofits. Members are connecting with the residents in the corridor to share project updates and gather input about the potentially positive and negative affects of light rail on their lives. But all parties recognize that information gathering is only a first step.

“Funding is the critical piece,” said Chris Chiacchierini, executive director of Neighborhood House and a coalition member. “If we have the big ideas and if we keep communities of color in the conversation and at the forefront, then I think that gives us an opportunity to really push on some of the bigger entities...We need to make an investment in the capacity of community organizations.”

In 2019, Metro awarded the Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability a grant to explore community-centered development plans for two of the light rail’s future station areas. The plan would include redevelopment of the Barbur Transit Center with a focus on equitable growth and the creation of a multicultural town center.

On the housing front, Metro’s SWEDS outlines specific actions including encouraging investment in family sized homes and new affordable housing.

TriMet’s Koozer said the agency will be acquiring private property to build the light rail and infrastructure so the organization will have construction staging sites and excess property that could be made available for development.

“All of the partners in this project are working really hard to make sure that the folks that currently live in the corridor and other people who may want to live in the corridor who are lower income have the opportunities to both have businesses and to live there,” Koozer said.

A \$652 million affordable housing bond measure approved by voters in 2018 will provide funding for permanently affordable homes in Clackamas, Multnomah and Washington counties. Some of that money could support projects along the SW Corridor rail line.

“Whether the train gets built or not, these things are critical to stabilizing communities,” Metro’s Harper said. “These pressures don’t go away because we decide not to build a MAX train. They’ll still be there and people will still be facing these pressures and so these things we do, they’re important regardless of whether we end up with a line or not.”

Tigard in particular is looking to enhance the Tigard Triangle — bordered by Highway 99W, 217 and I-5 — and develop the areas surrounding the MAX line. Lloyd Purdy, economic development manager for the city of Tigard, said developers are

already acquiring properties near the line and some have already started building multi-story, mixed-use apartments and other buildings in the city.

He said the list of projects underway or expected to break ground soon include more than 800 market-rate apartments and 350 affordable housing units all within the Tigard Triangle.

THE PROMISE

Stroll through the Orenco Station neighborhood in Hillsboro on a sunny weekend afternoon and, pre-Covid at least, you'd find plenty to do. You could enjoy a glass of vino at Renaissance Wines, a bite at Salam restaurant, and finish it off with a scoop of gelato. You could pop into New Seasons or Kitchen Kaboodle.

You could get a pedicure, go to the dentist or get a massage. And if you want, you could live there, too, in a condo or an apartment.

Prior to 1998, none of that would have been possible. That's the year that the Orenco Station MAX station opened, bringing the Blue Line to Hillsboro. Since then, Orenco Station has become a model for transit-oriented development.

A [2013 study](#) conducted by the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy found that TriMet's Blue Line had generated \$6.6 billion in development.

TriMet's most recently completed MAX project, the Orange Line, has had mixed results. The line created a route from downtown Portland to Milwaukie with 17 stations.

Opened in 2015, the line has seen underwhelming ridership but has boosted the city's property values. According to Realtor.com, the current median listed price for a home in Milwaukie is around \$430,000. That's up from about \$285,000 in 2014.

In addition, downtown Milwaukie has filled up with shops and living spaces. Axletree Apartments, a five story, 110-unit mixed use apartment development, opened adjacent to the MAX station last year. It is the first newly-constructed multifamily project in Milwaukie in a decade.

It's difficult to know what development and ridership would look like on the SW Corridor MAX line. John Southgate of Cascadia Partners has 35 years of strategic

planning experience and serves on Metro's Transit-Oriented Development Steering Committee. He said the SW Corridor MAX is unique, in part because of its positioning along Capitol Highway and I-5.

"This is really a different type of line," he said. "I don't think it compares easily to any other line because it is going down the middle of a highway ... it's a post-war suburban place. I suppose it is kind of analogous to Interstate ... but Interstate has a bunch of pre-war neighborhoods with more walkable environments. There's very little to work with (on Barbur Boulevard) from a place-making, urbanologist perspective."

Southgate said the stations in west Portland near Capitol Highway are promising for development, including the SW 53rd Street Station and the Barbur Boulevard Transit Station. The larger-sized lots along Barbur could support a range of different projects.

In addition, because of a transfer from Barbur Boulevard into the Barbur Transit Station, the Portland Bureau of Transportation would be in the mix, which could lead to improvements to make the area more pedestrian friendly.

"One of the nice things about SW Corridor is you'll have these larger holdings of one to five acres," Southgate said. "There is an opportunity to redo Barbur Boulevard in a more walkable, urban, economically viable fashion. But it always has to be done through the lens of impact and the risk of displacement."

All told along the SW Corridor line, TriMet plans to add 10 miles of new sidewalks and crosswalks, more than six miles of enhanced bike facilities, up to 2,000 park and ride spaces, 1.6 miles of shared transit way and a new operations and maintenance facility, which TriMet anticipates will bring up to 150 new jobs to Tigard.

A ROADBLOCK EMERGES

The SW Corridor MAX line cleared a major hurdle in mid-July, when the Metro Council agreed to advance what's called the "Get Moving 2020" ballot measure to voters in the Nov. 3 election. The \$5 billion transportation package includes funding for the new rail line, and the money raised would come from a payroll tax imposed on businesses with more than 25 employees.

On Aug. 7, the Portland Business Alliance threw up a challenge when it asked Metro to withdraw the measure and rework it. Doing so, wrote PBA CEO Andrew Hoan, “would avoid a certain and unnecessary opposition campaign.”

PBA objected to the payroll tax, citing the struggling economy.

Metro hadn’t responded to the PBA’s request as of a press time. But even if the measure is delayed, it’s unlikely plans for a SW Corridor MAX line would be permanently derailed.

“I want people to be able to expand their opportunity via transit,” Metro’s Harper said. “To get better jobs, to get better training, to be able to go to the businesses that are important to them and their community.”

Maddie Pfeifer

Contributing writer

Portland Business Journal

