CORRIDORS OF OPPORTUNITY
From Pilot to Practice

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Guest Speakers:
Antonio Riley, Regional Administrator, HUD Region V, United States Department of Housing and Urban Development
Salin Geevarghese, Acting Director, Office of Sustainable Housing and Communities, United States Department of Housing and Urban Development

In 2010, the Corridors of Opportunity initiative was selected as one of the 45 funded initiatives under the HUD Sustainable Communities Regional Planning grant program. This program has influenced federal decision making and fostered regional cross-sector partnerships to advance strategies that improve access to jobs, housing, and amenities; increase transportation choices; and enhance economic competitiveness by improving opportunities for people of all incomes and backgrounds.

The two guest speakers discussed the national importance of this work in making lasting changes to strengthen communities and economies.

Antonio Riley began his remarks by thanking attendees for the opportunity to help celebrate the completion of three years of what he termed an “impressive collaborative effort.” The vision created under the Corridors of Opportunity initiative will provide diverse benefits to the residents of the Minneapolis–St. Paul metropolitan area and enhance the region’s competitive edge in attracting jobs and private investment, he said. “I am excited to learn about your future plans for this region and how the federal government can be an even more significant partner in that effort.”

Riley pointed to some of the major accomplishments completed through the Corridors of Opportunity initiative and praised the region for its efforts. “You have demonstrated that cooperation among diverse local governments can be obtained to achieve a regional vision…also have been thoroughly impressed by your commitment to engage the underrepresented segments of a population whose voices traditionally go unheard. And, you have made an exemplary effort in undertaking the Fair Housing and Equity Assessment (FHEA) to identify needs and opportunities to affirmatively further fair housing throughout the entire metropolitan region.”

The Twin Cities area is recognized nationally as a center of visionary leadership and planning to create and preserve healthy, viable communities, Riley continued. While federal grants help support such endeavors, success really comes from local vision and leadership; cooperative investments of time and resources by the business community, foundations, academic institutions, and community organizations; and from “the heart and the soul of people who live in those communities,” he said.

These investments—coupled with other activities such as integrating transportation and land-use planning, preserving and revitalizing neighborhoods, creating walkable communities, and broadly distributing affordable housing—create exactly the kind of synergy President Obama had in mind when he directed his appointees to work more closely together to break down organizational silos within and between federal agencies, Riley explained. “The President’s instruction to us was to build on one another’s programs and resources to more effectively serve the public.”

While this event is a celebration of the recent successes of the Corridors of Opportunity initiative, he continued, it is also an opportunity to discuss, together, where to go next, how to continue building partnerships, and where to find new opportunities to work with the federal government. “I know the value of our partnerships, and having you as a voice is important,” he said. “You are looking at a new federal government today...When you come up with ideas about what you want to accomplish, we will work hand in hand with you... We are not just here to help, but we are ready to be your partner and your bridge to opportunity.”

According to Salin Geevarghese, “It was very clear from the beginning that the federal government must be a partner with communities to achieve better outcomes...rather than serve as an impediment or a problem to be solved. We must work across all sectors—nonprofit, public, private, and philanthropic—and leverage federal investments for greater effectiveness and efficiency and to maximize benefits while minimizing costs.” Issues must be approached comprehensively with integrated approaches and solutions, he explained, requiring that silos between and among agencies and policies be dismantled. “We have to be results and performance oriented rather than process and compliance oriented as has been our focus for so long.”

The Twin Cities region is among the very few places around the country that competed successfully for HUD’s Sustainable Communities Regional Planning Grant Program, he continued. “You are among the 11 percent [of applicants awarded a grant], and I congratulate you for all you have accomplished: countless projects, corridor-wide planning and development, small business loans...cross-cutting, cross-sector [partnerships between] organizations, leaders, residents, and decision makers...all poised to help you move from Corridors of Opportunity to the Partnership for Regional Opportunity—the new vision before you.”

Geevarghese acknowledged that although the Twin Cities is a region well known nationally to have accomplished much in its efforts to develop transit equity, Minneapolis–St. Paul is still not delivering on this vision for all people in all neighborhoods. This region has unfinished business, he said, and now has the chance to do more than simply talk about the state

“We are not just here to help, but we are ready to be your partner and your bridge to opportunity.”

—Antonio Riley
of equity and opportunity in the region; it has the chance to do something about it.

“I stand before you today and ask you to seize hold of your unfinished work to create an economically prosperous region for all of your people. Do it, because we cannot afford for any child in any family not to have a chance to succeed. It is more than just a moral imperative; it is an economic imperative.”

To drive home this point, Geevarghese cited a recent study on economic mobility by a group of researchers from Harvard University and the University of California, Berkeley. It found that upward mobility is higher in cities with better K-12 education systems and less sprawl (as measured by commute time) and income inequality. These regions will become magnets for investment and be the places where talent will flock, he predicted.

“So who do you want to be, MSP? Do you want to be a region that rests on its laurels and says it is doing as well as it can? Or, are you making a decision today that you can do better, you must do better, and as such you are committing to finish the unfinished business? As you leave [this event], know that you will have a federal partner who is with you, who will invest in you, who will hold you accountable to your own aspirations, and who will celebrate your success. We will bring our ability to break down silos, remove barriers, and partner with you every step of the way...We will listen keenly to what you need and bring you the value that enables you to seize your vision for economic competitiveness and finish your unfinished business.”

“I stand before you today to ask you to seize hold of your unfinished work to create an economically prosperous region for all.”

—Salin Geevarghese

Panel Discussion

Moderator:
Paul Williams, Deputy Mayor, City of St. Paul

Panelists:
John (Jay) Cowles III, President, Unity Avenue Associates, and Chair, Itasca Project Transportation Initiative
Gary Cunningham, Metropolitan Council Member, District 7, and Vice President and Chief Program Officer, Northwest Area Foundation
Mary Tingerthal, Commissioner, Minnesota Housing

Reacting to the guest speakers’ remarks, a panel of local voices reflected on the lessons learned from the Corridors of Opportunity project and discussed the opportunities and challenges ahead in growing a prosperous, equitable, and sustainable region.

This discussion, which was led by St. Paul Deputy Mayor Paul Williams, largely centered on how the issue of equity is being addressed in the region and what unfinished work must be moved forward as the Corridors of Opportunity initiative winds down and transitions to the Partnership for Regional Opportunity.

Gary Cunningham responded first by pointing out the ongoing need to target resources where “we know there is not the same amount of opportunity for every one.” Every child in a community needs to have access to opportunity, he said, but that requires more than just a federal government program or bureaucratic movement. “This has to be a movement of people all saying we want a different world. We are turning a corner on the discussion about equity, opportunity, and access [in this region], because of the leadership and courage from people like Met Council Chair Susan Haigh,” he continued. “We all have to stand behind Chair Haigh in this effort in order to realign how resources, access, and opportunity happen within this region.”

Business leader John (Jay) Cowles III then discussed his involvement in the Itasca Project, a CEO-led, volunteer leadership group that includes politicians, foundation executives, civic leaders, and leaders of educational institutions. The group’s intention is to understand what the strategic priorities for the region need to be in order to remain economically competitive.

Cowles reflected that the initiative’s unfinished business is deepening the community engagement work that it has catalyzed. “We’ve discovered [through Itasca Project efforts] that natural barriers exist from years of hardened silos and functional focus. We have been forced to discover the limits of our own comfort and knowledge of the different cultures in our
community. One of our greatest challenges will be to really take ownership of the need for cultural competence, comfort, and sensitivity so we can be as inclusive in our engagement process as we want to be. Along with that, I think there will be an opportunity to develop accountability and transparency that we have not had to before, not only to one another and within the agencies and institutions, but also with the public. This will bring a kind of trust with the public that will allow great things to happen.”

In terms of equity and affordable housing, in many respects, the Twin Cities has been way out ahead of other regions, Mary Tingerthal added. This region is one of the few areas, for example, with a metropolitan-wide housing and redevelopment authority enabling Section 8 voucher holders to shop in many communities to find the housing they need. But in other ways some of the leadership in this area has atrophied, she said.

As a result of the Corridors of Opportunity initiative, the Twin Cities now stands at the edge of rediscovering how to once again lead. “I hope that over the next three years, HUD really will be more focused on outcomes and results and less on process and compliance and that the leaders in this room…go back to [their] communities to find the right ways within [them] to engage this discussion. We will need those individual discussions as well as the greater discussion in order to make change happen.”

Moderator Paul Williams then explained that the “equity conversation” has been going on in the Twin Cities for a “very long time,” and he asked Cowles specifically what has changed during the last three years of the Corridors of Opportunity project and how ready business is today to take on the issue of equity.

“I think business understands the practical imperatives…but is struggling with what its role is relative to that of other players,” Cowles replied. “The good news is that [the business community] is focused on this issue and understands that the disparities in our region are not tolerable as they currently exist. As such, I think [businesses] are committed to the long term to work to develop partnerships and strategies.”

When asked to talk more specifically about what is needed to move the equity agenda forward, Cunningham said that as a region, we need to change course. “We need an adaptive change…but old habits are difficult to change…We are used to doing things the way we have always done them. We’re at a place today in the Twin Cities where we could go either way. We could either be a competitive region positioned for opportunity and prosperity for all. Or, we could be a region where the [affordable and accessible] areas where people can move into gets smaller and smaller…We have to invest in areas of low income and low opportunity to make them places where everyone can live.”

Cunningham’s remarks shifted the discussion toward the topic of affordable housing, and Williams used the opportunity to ask Tingerthal to discuss some of Minnesota Housing’s latest initiatives.

The agency’s 2014 Affordable Housing Plan has two key programs, she reported. One is a targeted mortgage opportunity program designed to make mortgages available for people who do not quite meet today’s extremely stringent mortgage lending standards. Married to that is a pool of dollars to enable community organizations, such as Build Wealth Minnesota, to help families aspiring to become home owners gather the down payment and credit history and make the overall commitment necessary to become successful home owners.

Historically, the debate on fair housing has focused too much on the issue of rental housing. Tingerthal explained, adding that if communities get behind these two programs and figure out how they play into the larger overall strategy, the result will be both an ownership and rental set of [affordable housing] solutions.

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—Jay Cowles

While housing in and of itself is one part of economic development, Riley added, creating economic opportunities to make communities viable is just as important. “I am interested in learning more about the business aspect of this initiative and to talk about how federal partnerships can be more supportive.”
Equitable Transit-Oriented Development

Equitable transit-oriented development ensures that people of modest means are able to benefit from transit and development investments. Panelists in this session discussed how the region is advancing equitable TOD, what’s been learned moving from planning to implementation, and what challenges remain.

Moderator: Andriana Abariotes, Executive Director, Twin Cities Local Initiatives Support Corporation

Panelists:
- Jay Bad Heart Bull, President and CEO, Native American Community Development Institute (NACDI)
- Colleen Carey, President, The Cornerstone Group and Urban Land Institute Trustee Minnesota
- John Doan, Director, Hennepin County Housing, Community Works and Transit
- Brian Lamb, General Manager, Metro Transit

Moderator Andriana Abariotes set the scene for a panel discussion on equitable transit-oriented development. The intent, she said, is to share what has been learned over the last three years as well as what challenges lie ahead. This includes different strategies for product development around TOD, district planning, joint development, and financing. “How do we pull together a myriad of financing tools?” she asked. “What does it look like when we’re talking about finding the right opportunity sites, and how do we control them? And how do we engage, because really, a lot of the places we’re talking about are already-existing communities?”

When Jay Bad Heart Bull moved to the Twin Cities from South Dakota, he noticed a much more diverse community. “The American Indian population is very integrated, and sometimes we’re hidden in plain sight,” he said. He explained that the Native American Community Development Institute (NACDI) aims to connect, organize, and implement the visions of the community that honor its voice and its aspirations. One of the projects it is working on is the Anpetu Wa’ate Cultural Arts Marketplace, located in the median of East Franklin Avenue at the light-rail station. “We’re really trying to activate that area because it’s just a dead zone,” he said. NACDI is trying to pull in all community residents, not just native people, to use mass transit and make it inviting. The development will incorporate an arts marketplace for food vendors, entrepreneurs selling goods, a performance stage, and public art “to make it a safer junction for people to interact and grow together and use mass transit in a more holistic and engaged way,” he said.

The Cornerstone Group, Colleen Carey explained, has completed a variety of different projects with the common thread of looking for opportunities to help communities solve problems. In the 20 years it’s been doing that, it has learned what actually solves problems, she continued. “We used to think that our job was just to build a great building. Turns out communities need a lot more than a great building...it’s more about the intangible things...Developers need to have a more integrated, holistic approach to what creates communities, not just build a building and hope everything works out,” she said. “The way to solve some of our problems is to be living next to each other and knowing each other and understanding each other.” That includes building more mixed-income developments that are beautiful, designed with healthy materials, and walkable and safe.

The Cornerstone Group also wants to incorporate arts and culture, nature, open space, urban agriculture, and opportunities for people to have social connections and life-long learning, Carey continued. “Those things don’t just happen; you have to be very intentional about them. You can design spaces that support that kind of thing,” she said. Two projects her group is currently working on are Lyndale Gardens in Richfield and a project in the Prospect Park neighborhood of Minneapolis at a Green Line light-rail stop.

From his first days at the Metropolitan Council, John Doan said, there was discussion about the huge gaps and inequality in the region in education, health, and other indicators of quality of life. At that time, the Council had just received the COO grant, and he credits that with giving him a much better understanding of what equitable TOD, and equity in the region, means and how it can be implemented. Doan now serves as director for Hennepin County’s Housing, Community Works and Transit Department. “I don’t know of any other place, at least in local government, where housing, development, and transit are all bundled up into one portfolio of work,” he said. “Many of these innovative transformational investments will happen and are happening right now at the county level.”

Brian Lamb noted that TOD is not a new concept—the metro
area was built on TOD. Every time the streetcar line extended, new neighborhoods developed; the same higher-density places that exist in the city right now were created in the late 1800s and early 1900s around streetcars. “We’re relearning some lessons at a very important time in this region’s development,” he said; the region’s development is predicated on the projection of another 800,000 to 850,000 people living here by 2040. “How do we move people and not just vehicles? How do we stimulate that same development opportunity that was in place 100 to 130 years ago?”

Metro Transit is in the process of creating a TOD office, Lamb said, because “we live street corner to street corner. The opportunities to make a difference aren’t always in these magnificent buildings... at every street corner there’s an opportunity to make it work more effectively.” In some cases that calls for pedestrian improvements; in others, installing safety and calls for pedestrian improvements; “One of the interesting things about the light-rail station on Franklin Avenue is that when it was first being introduced... the native population didn’t show up, or they weren’t engaged, and a lot of communities of color weren’t brought into that process,” Bad Heart Bull said. “One lesson that our community learned is that we need to have our own community members advocating and being present and inviting our own constituents to the table. Getting that authentic engagement in the community means going out and networking, being present in the neighborhood associations, including everyone... who lives in that community,” he said.

The organization has since held a series of visioning sessions around transit, which were some of the most diverse engagement sessions he’s ever seen, he said. People showed up, he continued, “because they trusted the organization. They knew that we had their best interests at heart... When it’s a government official coming in, or someone without those community connections, it’s harder to engage,” he said. “Being that advocacy group that builds those bridges for everybody who’s going to use Metro Transit was a big takeaway.”

Abariotes pointed out that Corridors of Opportunity projects are providing different vantage points from which to learn. An example of development “outside the box,” Carey said, is a recent mixed-income housing development (80 percent market rate, 20 percent affordable) that includes a large public space component. “We’re not just building an apartment building here, we’re building an entire community and transforming an area,” she said. This includes a concert stage, an urban farm, a pizza oven, and a farmer’s market pavilion. What also makes it challenging, Carey continued, is the financing. “What we’re finding is the capital market system isn’t ready for this. One of the problems is that we have tried to make it all really simple and efficient and cost-effective. The most cost-effective way to invest in something is if the ‘something’ is the same every time,” she said. What is needed is a culture change—to one that supports trying new things, being innovative and creative, and accepting that sometimes mistakes will be made, she said. Lamb echoed Carey’s thoughts about the need for innovation and accepting that mistakes may result. “We need to collaborate. The chances of making big mistakes will be less,” he said. Innovation is also needed in the way TOD projects are financed. “We need to figure out a way to entice new capital that hasn’t been able to understand this.”

Doan said that on the issue of financing and capital, one of the unique opportunities that Hennepin County has is that it can be patient. “We can be the longer-term investment that says when

“If you sit on any one of the vehicles in the transit system, you can see equity at work... it isn’t reserved for this or that person.”

—Brian Lamb

Jay Bad Heart Bull, Colleen Carey, John Doan
you put in a billion dollar investment, we hope land values go up—they should go up," he said. Unfortunately, a side effect is that people could be priced out of that market. And families that have lower incomes tend to be more transit dependent. "How do we make sure that in the process of making these investments that we at minimum hold harmless the impact to those people who are already there, but also create opportunities for others to use this investment who really need it and depend on it?"

From a transit perspective, Lamb said, he's not able to say which projects Metro Transit will be able to move forward with in the next several years; in contrast, many other regions have more long-range plans. The expectation, he said, is to get projects done on time and on budget—which may mean less community engagement. "But active engagement doesn’t end when you turn that first shovel," he said.

Finally, Abariotes asked panelists what equity in TOD looks like. Bad Heart Bull said his definition of equity is balance. "When we’re talking about development in these corridors, it’s about having the community involved in every step of the process. It’s not just 'Tell us what you want and we’ll build it.' Tell us what you want, and be with us during the process."

And, he added, "Success would look like more brown faces in these discussions and rooms, at these tables and in leadership...I'd feel welcome and feel like my community is being represented." Doan said equitable development means, at a minimum, "doing no harm...[We need to] make sure there's more public good that's happening, because we're making such huge investments."

Regional Equity and Community Engagement

Moderator:
Repa Mekha, President and CEO, Nexus Community Partners, and member, Corridors of Opportunity Community Engagement Team

Panelists:
Janet Jeremiah, Community Development Director, City of Eden Prairie
Lyssa Leitner, Transportation Planner, Washington County
Va-Megn Thoj, Executive Director, Asian Economic Development Association
Asad Aliweyd, Founder and Executive Director, New American Academy

Corridors of Opportunity set aside a portion of its funding for a series of outreach and engagement grants to those community groups that would support innovative, place-based initiatives to engage and involve underrepresented communities. Panelists in this session represented a mix of community engagement grantees and public sector partners working along multiple corridors in the region.

According to moderator Repa Mekha, the Community Engagement Team (CET) was tasked to disperse $720,000 in engagement grants via two rounds of funding to support community-organizing projects along four different transit ways. This resulted in approximately 39 grants to 26 community-based organizations and served to strengthen the relationships between these organizations and the various government agencies involved. "It was deliberate to build these partnerships so that they would extend beyond the three-year grant period," Mekha said. "Today's panelists will highlight some of their experiences as part of this effort."

Southwest Corridor
The proposed Southwest Light-Rail Transit (LRT) line, targeted to open in 2019, will connect downtown Minneapolis to Eden Prairie through St. Louis Park, Hopkins, and Minnetonka. According to Janet Jeremiah, the City of Eden Prairie has been actively involved in the planning efforts to ensure this project will bring a positive impact to the community, including its growing and vibrant population of new immigrants from East Africa.

It is vital to understand and incorporate the needs and ideas of traditionally underrepresented populations as critical decisions are made on investments in transportation and affordable housing along the corridor, Jeremiah said, and to avoid the devastating impact of poorly conceived transportation projects of the past.

New American Academy founder and executive director Asad Aliweyd agreed. "In order for [these new immigrants] to succeed, we need good education for our children, we need affordable housing...we want to grow our job
opportunities and we need reliable transportation.”

The New American Academy, located in Eden Prairie, serves as the only Somali-led institution operating in the southwest area of the Twin Cities’ region. The organization is dedicated to serving the East African population in this area through various programs including work in education, citizenship, housing, mentoring and tutoring, employment, civic engagement, and citizen participation.

The New American Academy was awarded two Corridors of Opportunity community engagement grants totaling $70,000. The grants helped fund a series of workshops and community forums to help engage the Somali community in planning for new businesses, jobs, and housing along the Southwest light-rail corridor.

“We held more than 35 meetings in the first year of the grant in efforts to make sure our community understood that light rail is coming to Eden Prairie and what that means to our future,” Aliweyd said. The Somali community would greatly benefit from the Southwest light-rail line, he continued, adding that this community is ready to embrace this as an opportunity to improve their quality of life.

Gateway Corridor

The Gateway Corridor, which is still being considered for development, stretches from downtown St. Paul to the St. Croix River Bridge, generally along Interstate 94 and Hudson Road. Unlike other corridors in the region that have been in the works for 30-plus years, conversations first started about the Gateway Corridor in 2009, Lyssa Leitner explained. While many older corridor projects did not provide adequate opportunity for community engagement, Gateway planners understand that the potential for equitable development along the Gateway Corridor greatly increases with early and consistent resident input.

To that end, the East Side Prosperity Campaign (ESPC) has worked to gather a strong coalition of culturally-specific organizations and placed-based community organizations to collaborate for sustainable community change on the east side of St. Paul. The ESPC was awarded two Corridors of Opportunity community engagement grants totaling $65,000, Leitner said.

These funds helped the ESPC establish a coalition of organizations called Engage East Side, which was created specifically to engage underrepresented communities in influencing transit planning and decisions, including those along the Gateway Corridor. Through two years of work, Engage East Side conducted a variety of activities to bring a diverse set of community voices to discussions about transit development for the East Side.

To wrap up this session, Mekha suggested that next steps should include anchoring the best practices gleaned from the Corridors initiative into policy and getting organizations to build equity into their staffing and budgeting processes. “These things don’t just happen,” he said. “They require being intentional, taking risks, and stepping outside of what we’re comfortable with.”

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―Asad Aliweyd

extensive transit-related research project; and many other advocacy efforts for comprehensive transit development for the East Side.

Engage East Side also joined with the four East Side District Councils and the East Side Area Business Association (ESABA) as a part of the Fostering East Side Transit Equity Conversations (FESTEC) collaborative effort to develop organizers, acquire research data, and engage residents around transit. FESTEC was a six-month project funded by the Ramsey County Rail Authority through a Corridors of Opportunity grant.

Central Corridor

The Central Corridor route is the new light-rail line connecting downtown St. Paul and Minneapolis set to open for riders on June 14, 2014. The line runs on 11 miles of exclusive right-of-way between downtown St. Paul and downtown Minneapolis, with much of the route along University Avenue. According to Va-Megn Thoj, Asian-owned businesses make up about 15 to 20 percent of small businesses on the Central Corridor. In 2006, the Asian Economic Development Association (AEDA) began organizing these small businesses to help address the potential negative impact construction of this LRT line could have on them.

Funded in part by a $40,000 Corridors of Opportunity Outreach and Engagement Grant awarded in 2011, AEDA has worked to build the capacity of small businesses along the corridor through business retention programs, technical assistance, branding, marketing, and advocacy, Thoj explained. These efforts helped influence a number of beneficial changes to the corridor project.

Besides providing financial assistance, Corridors of Opportunity offered other benefits to Thoj’s organization, including the chance to work collaboratively with other corridor stakeholders to better influence action and decision making.

Asad Aliweyd, Lyssa Leitner
Transportation Investment to Advance Opportunity

Moderator:
Russ Adams, Executive Director, Alliance for Metropolitan Stability, and member, Corridors of Opportunity Community Engagement Team

Panelists:
George Garnett, Director of Strategic Development, Summit Academy OIC
Matt Kramer, Principal, KMA Group, and member, Transportation Advisory Board
Susan Mulvihill, Deputy Commissioner, Minnesota Department of Transportation
Jennifer Munt, Metropolitan Council Member, District 3, and Public Affairs Director, AFSCME Council 5

A financially sustainable, world-class transportation system is vital for a thriving Twin Cities regional economy. Transportation, including transit, is also a fundamental link between people and opportunity. Panelists in this session discussed what’s needed to create this system and how it will benefit Minnesota’s citizens, workers, visitors, and businesses.

Moderator Russ Adams set the table with opening remarks about the broader issues surrounding transportation, infrastructure, and urban growth. “Never before has there been a moment like this in U.S. history,” he said. People are driving less, and younger and older populations are interested in walkable and affordable neighborhoods. Policymakers are beginning to deal with climate change and greenhouse gas emissions. In the Twin Cities, the business community is supporting the build-out of the transit system to connect workers and jobs more efficiently.

Unfortunately, the Twin Cities metro area is well behind its peers in terms of rail and bus service, and “the transportation system historically has not served north Minneapolis as well as it should have,” Adams said. North neighborhoods are demanding access to developing transit corridors; their leaders think the robust infrastructure being planned could lead to an urban renaissance for their area.

Adams then turned the discussion over to the session panelists, beginning with Sue Mulvihill. “We can build anything at MnDOT… anything that’s concrete and steel,” she said. “But we need to listen to customers and stakeholders and assess their needs—we can’t just build it and they will come.” According to Mulvihill, the department needs to assess these interests and work with partners such as the Metropolitan Council to support economic growth and system sustainability while better understanding its impact on its customers. “Our department is key to providing opportunities, getting people where they need to be, and improving their quality of life,” she said.

For transit to promote equity, “we have to think about how we develop transit in a substantially different way,” George Garnett said. “Communities of race and low income are underintegrated in this community and transit-limited, and they don’t have access to jobs and training… Few people think about those kinds of issues as they think of where the next transit or bus line goes,” he said. “These tend to be subordinate considerations. If you can’t change that kind of process, then I am concerned that we will never use transit as a true tool to advance equity.”

The business community’s focus is efficiency, Matt Kramer said. “We have to think about how we develop transit in a substantially different way,” he said. “Never before has there been a moment like this in U.S. history,” he said. “The Blue Line will be on time.” Two major business developments—Comcast in Minnetonka and Shutterfly in Shakopee—will be auto-dependent; those employers will pay a premium on snow days and be faced with more turnover because many employees can’t afford to drive there.

Kramer recommended stronger, integrated economic incentives to encourage business growth in the central cities. Suburbs also need transit for job access and business efficiency. “The business community is not anti-transit—in fact, it is just the opposite,” he said. “The lack of a multimodal system is a handicap to business growth.”

Jennifer Munt said she came to the session wearing three hats. As a member of the Metropolitan Council, Munt relayed that the council is in a new era in which it “will think regionally and act equitably. That’s our vision.” As public affairs director with AFSCME, she said her union represents 15,000 workers who drive, bike, or take transit to businesses. “To attract the best and brightest workers, we need to figure out ways to get them to work in an easy way,” she said. And as a former president of Transit for Livable Communities, Munt voiced support for building a movement of people who want more and better transport choices. “It’s the public will that drives the political will to get things done,” she said.

Much was weighing on Kenya McKnight’s mind while listening to the day’s conversations. “We suffer a lot,” she said. “Not just because it’s an issue of color, or of poverty. It’s improving their quality of life,” she said.

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Kramer recommended stronger, integrated economic incentives to encourage business growth in the central cities. Suburbs also need transit for job access and business efficiency. “The business community is not anti-transit—in fact, it is just the opposite,” he said. “The lack of a multimodal system is a handicap to business growth.”

Jennifer Munt said she came to the session wearing three hats. As a member of the Metropolitan Council, Munt relayed that the council is in a new era in which it “will think regionally and act equitably. That’s our vision.” As public affairs director with AFSCME, she said her union represents 15,000 workers who drive, bike, or take transit to businesses. “To attract the best and brightest workers, we need to figure out ways to get them to work in an easy way,” she said. And as a former president of Transit for Livable Communities, Munt voiced support for building a movement of people who want more and better transport choices. “It’s the public will that drives the political will to get things done,” she said.

Much was weighing on Kenya McKnight’s mind while listening to the day’s conversations. “We suffer a lot,” she said. “Not just because it’s an issue of color, or of poverty. It’s
an issue of humanity. Somehow the cornerstone of humanity has been left out of what it means to live in an environment where everybody wins, where quality of life is the value of how our world and environment continue to grow, prosper, evolve."

McKnight said the odds were stacked against her before she was born, and the hoops are more difficult even today as she fights not only "economic disparities but white supremacy attitudes that challenge my right to be involved in these discussions." McKnight’s oldest niece lives in north Minneapolis but works at a nursing home in south Minneapolis. A job just like it in Golden Valley pays more, but there is no bus to get to it. "It hurts my heart," she said. "While she’s doing well... she doesn’t have access to a better job closer to her house. That’s a picture of inequity. That’s a picture of what regional connectivity should look like. It should provide her with an opportunity to get to her job. It’s a story of a hard-working woman who should be set up for success, but lacks access to opportunities."

"We need to go beyond project-based employment and look at careers... and look at the long range... and look at careers."

―Kenya McKnight

Adams then launched a question-and-answer period. Building out the transit system is projected to provide 30,000 construction jobs during a 30-year period; the region expects $8 billion in other construction projects by 2020. Who will have access to those jobs?

"Construction requires that people are mobile," Garnett said. "Wherever these jobs are in the region, people will need to get to them. I’m not sure if transit will help them...I don’t know how that gap gets filled?"

Garnett also discussed efforts to get more women and people of color into a field that has not been traditionally open to them. His agency builds partnerships with MnDOT, companies, and others to create a ladder to those opportunities. "We have to have a metrowide system that organizes everyone in the construction sector around this challenge." He noted that this is not just an issue of equity: in the next four to five years there will be a huge talent loss in construction, and it takes four years to become a journeyman.

McKnight said workforce investment and development is critical in being able to align skills with current and future jobs. "We need to go beyond project-based employment and look at the long range...and look at careers." Business and entrepreneurial opportunities are also needed. She challenged government to think about contracting with DBEs (disadvantaged business enterprises) and hiring workers who may not be union members. Union membership itself is a political issue: "Where do we begin to regulate there, and push the bar, and raise union membership for people of color?"

MnDOT requires contractors to meet DBE goals, Munt explained, but some contractors that don’t meet those goals take the department to court if they are not selected. "In the newspaper, this looks like we’re wasting tax dollars, but we’re trying to be accountable to hire DBEs to work on projects," she said. "We will continue to hold contractors to meeting DBE goals—it’s just the right thing to do." Internally, MnDOT is working to attract more people of color and women. "We are committed to engaging and hiring people who reflect the communities we serve, and also making sure our contractors do," she said.

In response to a question about the role of suburbs, Garnett said it is critical that transit work in both directions. In the past, transit’s focus was getting the middle class from suburb to urban core. But the economy has changed and suburbs are now economic engines with more diversified economies, so the challenge is to get workers from core to suburb. "That’s what needs to change in transit systems. The suburbs have to be a critical part of that solution," he said.

Kramer pointed out that Arden Hills historically has had little transit access yet is home to several major employers (Boston Scientific, Land O’Lakes), and the city’s leadership is beginning to notice the benefits of transit. "There is no urban strategy that also isn’t a suburban strategy," he said.

The Southwest LRT line will connect workers in Minneapolis to jobs in Eden Prairie, Munt added. And along the line, there are 14 institutions of higher learning to prepare people for good jobs.

MnDOT and the Met Council both have long-range plans that look at needs, gaps, and what could be done with additional funding, Mulvihill said. MnDOT’s goal is to provide access for all people—not just drivers and transit users but also cyclists, pedestrians, and the disabled. "It’s not a matter of not wanting to do it, but when do the resources become available to do it," she said. "We need to find ways to make smart investments."