

Southwest light rail environmental impact review set to proceed



By **Craig Beebe**, reporting from Tigard

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Another big milestone for a big project.

A few weeks after winning narrow support from Tigard voters, a proposed Portland-to-Tualatin light rail project proceeded to its next stop Monday as local leaders finalized the range of routes, stations and related walking, biking and roadway projects to be studied in a federally-required environmental review.

Meeting at Tigard City Hall, the [Southwest Corridor Plan](#) Steering Committee engaged in a largely technical discussion about what should and shouldn't be included in the study, which is expected to take about a year.

But Metro Councilor and committee co-chair Craig Dirksen said it was a significant step nonetheless.

"Take note of and celebrate this important milestone," Dirksen said.

He noted that Monday was the fifth anniversary of the committee's adoption of a charter to guide its work on the Southwest Corridor Plan, a land use and transportation strategy involving [seven cities, Washington County, Metro, TriMet and the Oregon Department of Transportation](#).

A MAX line from the Portland Transit Mall to Bridgeport Village is the backbone of the Southwest Corridor vision, which also includes a number of other bus, road, bike and pedestrian improvements and development strategies in the fast-growing area.

The steering committee has already made a lot of big decisions about what the line will look like – including selecting light rail instead of bus rapid transit, keeping the line off Highway 99W south of Portland city limits and eliminating light rail tunnels to OHSU, Hillsdale and Portland Community College's Sylvania campus.

But important decisions still remain, and the federally-mandated environmental review can help. Known as an environmental impact statement, or EIS, it's an assessment of potential project benefits and impacts and possible ways to mitigate them.

The proposed MAX line is not finalized. Several potential alignments remain on the table, such as whether to travel on Barbur Boulevard or Naito Parkway in South Portland, and how to connect from the Tigard Triangle to downtown Tigard. There are also other components to consider, such as locations for stations and park-and-ride lots and how to connect riders with the OHSU complex on Marquam Hill and Portland Community College's Sylvania campus.

The environmental study will assess these alternatives for significant impacts on a large range of issues, including air and water quality, traffic, noise, habitat, wetlands, property acquisitions and environmental justice.

The study is complex and expensive, so project partners have sought to limit its scope to the most likely possibilities for the light rail project.

Focus on Barbur, or keep options open?

On Monday, the committee advanced a refined set of project options into the environmental review, following recommendations by planners from Metro, TriMet and the other partner agencies.

The committee adopted several modest changes to the range of alternatives released during a 30-day scoping period this fall. These changes included a narrowed set of options for connecting to Marquam Hill and PCC Sylvania and removal of one proposed station and park-and-ride in a Tigard industrial area.

Options to study

On Monday the committee adopted [these amendments](#) to the range of project options to be included in the environmental study.

The amendments modify [this more thorough document](#) outlining a range of alternatives to study.

A combined document will be released in late December. [Stay informed on the project page](#) →

Most of the committee's discussion Monday focused on the light rail alignment in one area: the roughly 2-mile stretch between the Burlingame neighborhood and the Barbur Transit Center in Southwest Portland. They also approved expanded descriptions of equity needs in the corridor as part of the project's formal purpose statement.

Two options have been on the table in that area: Run the light rail line on Barbur Boulevard or next to Interstate 5, about 300 feet to the southeast.

Portland leaders have said the Barbur Boulevard alignment would be better for the city's development goals there, while TriMet has said Barbur would likely be safer and more comfortable for transit riders.

TriMet general manager Neil McFarlane had asked planners to take a closer look at whether the I-5 alignment in that segment could be eliminated before going into the full environmental study, to spare some complexity, time and cost.

After a robust discussion Monday, the committee decided to keep studying both options until more is known about relative construction costs and MAX travel times and how light rail on Barbur might affect traffic flow.

"I think there's a lot more information we need to know," said ODOT Region 1 director Rian Windsheimer.

Beaverton Mayor Denny Doyle shared that view.

“This is a one-time deal,” Doyle said. “We’re going to build it and we’re going to live with it for a long time, so we better be darn sure we’re doing the best we can.”

But the I-5 alignment may yet be removed from the full study.

If early results show a Barbur alignment wouldn’t have major traffic impacts or be significantly slower than the I-5 alignment, the committee agreed to hold the option to remove the latter before the study is complete.

Community committee appointed

Also on Monday, leaders formally appointed 17 people to a Community Advisory Committee to help guide the project through its next phases.

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Metro received 47 applications for the committee, Metro public affairs specialist Eryn Deeming Kehe told the committee.

“We’re really lucky to have had the choices we did,” she said.

As it stands, the committee includes eight Portland residents, seven Tigard residents and two Tualatin residents.

The committee will likely ultimately have 19 members, Kehe said. Planners are seeking one more Barbur business or property owner and a person of color to join the committee as well.

Next steps: Study, listen, decide

With the steering committee’s action Monday, planners will dig in on the detailed study, Metro project manager Chris Ford told the committee.

Planners expect to release the draft environmental impact statement for a 45-day public comment period in about a year.

Ford said that although the work is comprehensive and very detailed, federal authorities expect a relatively concise, readable document that the public can understand.

The study is “a disclosure document, not a decision,” Ford noted. The steering committee will make its final route decisions in spring 2018 based not only on what the study reveals, but also on cost, what they hear from the public and agency partners, and other factors.

Leaders expect the project would then need to pass a regionwide funding vote, possibly in fall 2018, to provide the local money needed to match federal funds. Leaders expect that the federal government will pick up half the project costs.

Light rail could begin running in the corridor as early as 2025.

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