

April 2, 2024

Chair Scott Dibble, Vice Chair Kelly Morrison, and members of the Transportation Finance & Policy Committee,

As housing and transit advocates, we know that the benefits of transit investments are critical to closing equity gaps across job access, health equity, educational attainment, and social mobility. Conversely, we also know that the communities that rely on transit the most (BIPOC, low-income, people with disabilities) are also most vulnerable to displacement and gentrification that massive development projects like light rail disproportionately cause in our communities. Without proper safeguards and mitigation strategies, the communities that deserve and badly need enhanced transit service risk being pushed out of their homes and further away from good transit, and the opportunities transit connects us all to.

Investing now in an anti-displacement community prosperity program will ensure the Blue Line Extension project serves the intended communities: the legacy residents and transit riders this project was designed for, and the small businesses, entrepreneurs, artists, and tastemakers who are the lifeblood and drivers of the rich and dynamic cultures that exemplify why the region and Minnesota, more broadly, are one of the best places in the nation to live.

Minnesota exceptionalism is something we like to take pride in; however, we, as a state, are also sadly exceptional and stand out as a state when it comes to having some of the worst racial disparities in the nation. Often, these disparities have been born out of, or exacerbated by, transportation projects like the construction of I-94/the destruction of the Rondo neighborhood. In 2021, the Minnesota state legislature, along with the federal government following suit chose to think holistically and reparatively about how transportation dollars could be shepherded to mitigate ongoing harms related to that transportation project. We ask the legislature and the transportation committee to carry on that positive trajectory with SF4719/HF4683

Many of the communities across the Blue Line Extension corridor bear the present and past impacts of redlining and racist transportation planning. This corridor has some of the highest rates in the state for households without regular access to a personal vehicle, and many rely on transit to meet daily needs. The Harrison neighborhood has been particularly and generationally hit hard by transportation projects. From the construction of Olson Memorial Highway, which destroyed Sixth Avenue a thriving Black and Jewish business corridor and nearly a century later, legacy residents are experiencing active displacement and gentrification from the planning of the Blue Line Extension that never came to fruition; these funds can be the start of reparations for those residents who a bearing the human cost of light rail development, while also being left out of the transit service that was once promised.

The Blue Line Corridor also has a higher number of people experiencing poverty, a greater percentage of people of color, and high concentrations of cost-burdened households. It is critical that this project centers community voices and diverse stakeholders by advancing robust anti-displacement and community wealth-building strategies.

We support establishing and funding the Blue Line Extension anti-displacement community prosperity program, as outlined in HF 4683 (Agbaje) and SF 4719 (Dibble). This bill is rooted in the recommendations put forth by the community-led Blue Line Extension Anti-Displacement Workgroup in a comprehensive report issued last year, and it will jumpstart the implementation of those recommendations and set us on the path toward an abundant future. While this bill is a much-appreciated jumpstart of funding, we know that our communities need and deserve a significant amount of investment from local, state, and federal sources if we are to not only survive the project but thrive as a result of these investments.

Minnesota has an opportunity to model the exceptionalism and equitable leadership we strive for by changing the business-as-usual way transportation planning has been done in the past and protecting our most vulnerable communities before the cycle of damage and displacement repeats itself again.

This project is about the people, not the train. The Blue Line Extension anti-displacement community prosperity program will help ensure we are putting people first to address this critical transit equity issue and elevate Minnesota as a national leader.

Sincerely,

ACER, The Alliance for Metropolitan Stability, CAPI, Heritage Park Neighborhood Association, Lao Center of Minneapolis, MICAHA, Move Minnesota Action, MN 350, Pillsbury United Communities, and Urban Homeworks

