

Transportation Report to
SPC on Transportation and Transit
2019 March 20

ISC: UNRESTRICTED
TT2019-0204
Corrected

Interim Alternative Uses of Blue Line and Green Line LRT Rights-of-Way

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Council directed Administration to review interim uses of a number of parcels of City-owned land, designated for building Light Rail Transit (LRT) projects in the future. This report summarizes Administration's process for evaluating potential interim uses along future Blue Line and Green Line LRT rights-of-way (ROW).

First, Administration considered using these rights-of-way for short term transportation improvements. A number of rapid transit expansion projects were identified as potential projects for consideration. These projects have significant capital and operating budget implications. Administration recommends evaluating the potential rapid transit expansion projects as part of the upcoming RouteAhead Prioritization Report. The high-level analysis of these possible projects revealed they would have limited impact on the future LRT ROW. Also, if rapid transit expansion projects along the future Blue or Green Line alignments were prioritized in RouteAhead, those projects could still be a number of years from implementation. As a result, the LRT ROWs may be available for other uses for some period of time.

Pedestrian and cycling infrastructure were also considered. Pathway uses were not recommended for the LRT ROW due to major barriers throughout the network, as well as existing or planned pathways in the vicinity.

For those places and at those times where there is not expected to be a transportation use for the LRT ROW, non-transportation uses such as parks and community activated spaces were considered. Activating unused spaces can enhance community engagement by creating gathering places, opportunities for positive social interaction, and increasing the perception of safety. They can serve as incubators for future local businesses and can provide testing grounds for potential community assets in advance of significant capital investment. Given the available City resources, and given the success of recent example projects, for this report Administration focused on creating a framework for allowing partner-led activations of these unused spaces.

Administration recommends working with partners to activate one or more parcels of designated land as a pilot to better understand the internal process requirements and level of interest from partner organizations and the public before creating an intake to open the full inventory of City-owned parcels to partner-led project proposals.

ADMINISTRATION RECOMMENDATION

That the SPC on Transportation & Transit recommends that Council:

1. Direct Administration to include appropriate rapid transit expansion projects (per Attachment 1) for analysis in the upcoming RouteAhead Project Prioritization Report in Q3 of 2019.
2. Direct administration to engage partners in potential pilot projects to test interim non-transportation uses of future transit rights-of-way and report back with findings no later than Q2 2021.

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RECOMMENDATION OF THE SPC ON TRANSPORTATION AND TRANSIT COMMITTEE, 2019 MARCH 20

That Council:

1. Direct Administration to include appropriate rapid transit expansion projects (per Attachment 1) for analysis in the upcoming RouteAhead Project Prioritization Report in Q3 of 2019; and
2. Direct Administration to engage partners in potential pilot projects to test interim non-transportation uses of future transit rights-of-way and report back with findings no later than Q2 2021.

PREVIOUS COUNCIL DIRECTION / POLICY

NM2018-0689 (2018 May 29) directs Administration to “explore potential interim alternative uses for the reserved LRT ROWs for the Blue Line NE, north of Saddletowne Station, that may include, but are not limited to, transit improvements, pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, and parks that can be converted to LRT infrastructure” and to “provide an assessment of feasibility, capital costs required, return on investment, and timelines for the potential interim uses.”

TT2018-0145 Amendment 3 (2018 March 8) directs Administration to “explore the ways and means that the existing rights-of-way, north of 16th Avenue N and south of 126 Avenue S, can be activated for community purposes that may include, but are not limited to, BRT, pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure, that can then convert to LRT infrastructure.”

BACKGROUND

Alignments have been established for each of the Blue Line and Green Line LRT, with rights-of-way being acquired along the corridors. These rights-of-way include a mix of long linear strips along the routes, larger parcels for future stations and park and ride lots, and small parcels that will be utilized during construction. These spaces are maintained by The City of Calgary and represent an opportunity to address some community needs in the interim.

The City has recently advanced a new transit service offering with the MAX lines. These lines offer enhanced station amenities and provide rapid service through a mix of on street service (supported by queue jumps and other optimization tools) and transitway service (e.g. 17 Ave SE dedicated transit lanes in the median). These projects demonstrate the potential to use LRT ROWs to provide improved transit service in advance of LRT construction. Similarly, projects such as ContainR, EV Junction, ActivateYYC and This Is My Neighbourhood are examples of past activation projects. These projects demonstrate the value of collaboration and showcase the potential for partners with aligned objectives to bring short-term vibrancy and economic activity to adjacent communities until the land is needed for LRT expansion.

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INVESTIGATION: ALTERNATIVES AND ANALYSIS

Although the exact timing of future LRT extensions is not currently known, the existing RouteAhead phasing plan (which includes Blue Line and Green Line LRT extensions) is anticipated to be delivered within a 30-year time-frame.

Interim Transit Uses

As a first step, Administration reviewed interim transportation uses. Attachment 1 presents a summary of potential projects that were considered as part of this evaluation. These projects are capital investments. Operational improvements, such as service frequency, are not included in this analysis as that scope of work is within Calgary Transit's ongoing service optimization and would not typically have any impact on the LRT ROWs. The potential projects respond to Council direction to explore options for mode progression on the Green Line North and Southeast corridors, and the Blue Line Northeast corridor. Mode progression is the concept of providing increasing levels of transit service and infrastructure to build ridership and respond to demand as the city develops.

Potential projects included in the attachment range from upgrading existing bus rapid transit routes (BRT) to MAX level of service (enhanced customer amenities, including heated shelters and real-time information), to constructing transitways, to pre-building grade separations for the future LRT service and using them for bus service in advance of full LRT construction.

Each potential project was evaluated in terms of the expected lifespan of the investment, the benefits and risks, if the necessary land was already City-owned, and an order-of-magnitude construction cost. Based on this evaluation, some of the potential projects were recommended to be considered in more detail.

The appropriate mechanism to evaluate and prioritize these interim improvements is The City's Long-term Transit Strategy, RouteAhead. Administration recommends that the projects identified for further consideration in Attachment 1 be considered alongside other rapid transit expansion projects and presented to the SPC on Transportation & Transit in Q3 2019.

Other transportation uses were also considered. The LRT ROWs are not well suited to pathway facilities due to physical barriers and existing or planned parallel routes. When The City builds transit bridges and tunnels in the future, many will include pathways, but these structures are cost-prohibitive in advance of a major transit project.

The largest parcels within the LRT ROWs are spaces reserved for future Park and Ride lots or Transit-Oriented Development sites. If such a site is already served by BRT or MAX level transit service, it could be a good location to pre-build a Park and Ride lot or a first phase of TOD if it does not compromise the future LRT construction. These are significant capital investments and will be prioritized, where appropriate, by the relevant LRT expansion project teams.

Conclusion

The list of potential rapid transit outlined in Attachment 1 have limited impact on the LRT ROWs. Upgrade of BRT service to in street MAX service, for example, would rely on road rights-of-way, leaving the adjacent LRT lands unused. Further, if rapid transit expansion projects along the future Blue or Green Line alignments were prioritized in RouteAhead, those projects could still be a number of years from implementation. This means that much of the LRT ROW could be available for other uses for an extended period.

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Partner-Led Activations

Given the available City resources, and given the success of recent activation projects, Administration focused on creating a framework for allowing partner-led activations of these unused spaces that wouldn't normally be suited for expanded/interim transit use.

There are three key components necessary for a successful activation:

1. A Parcel of land that is empty, in usable condition, has reasonable local access, is of a useful size, and is in proximity to people who would benefit from the activation. Attachment 2 of this report provides a sample of three locations along the Blue and Green Line rights-of-way which would appear to be of significant interest for interim use. As an example, there is a triangle-shaped parcel at the intersection of 60 Street and 128 Avenue N.E. which has been retained to allow for a future LRT tunnel. This parcel is next to an occupied apartment building and other residences in an area lacking community amenities. This location is an opportunity for an interested partner to activate a community space for the next 10 years or more.
2. A Partner Organization that can deliver an interim use on the parcel. The City's Investing in Partnership strategy provides a framework for developing partnerships with community groups, cultural organizations, business innovators, and others that would be invested in delivering projects on these sites. Existing tools including a permit, a memorandum of understanding, an optional amenities agreement, a license of occupation, and a low-cost lease may all be suited to governing and facilitating activation projects, depending on the partner and the scope of the idea. Criteria for assessing the fit of potential partner organizations to deliver activations on City-owned rights-of-way is included below and can also be found in Attachment 3.

Screening Criteria	
Insurance / Liability	Can the partner provide sufficient insurance / liability protection for any risks of the proposed project that they will own?
Able to enter an agreement	Is there an existing legal mechanism that would allow the City and the proposed partner to work together?
Inclusive, non-partisan, and aligned with Corporate values	Is the partner an inclusive organization or group, and do they align with City corporate values around a safe, respectful, and inclusive workplace? Will the partner be perceived to be driving a social or political agenda that excludes some residents from participating?
Scoring Criteria	
Adaptable	Is the partner open-minded and willing to adjust plans to find a workable project?
Community-minded	Is the partner committed to investing in the community?
Collaborative	Is the partner bringing additional partners to the table to support the proposed project?
Capacity / longevity / sustainability	Does the partner have sufficient people and resources to support the project for its full life?
Experienced	Does the partner have a history of delivering on this type of project?

3. A project or idea that will enhance and activate the parcel and meet a need for the adjacent community. To validate our assumption that there are many possibilities for the

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future Blue Line and Green Line LRT rights-of-way, the project team worked with the Civic Innovation Lab to generate the list of possible uses. Attachment 4 provides a framework for evaluating project proposals with the following criteria:

Screening criteria	
Easy to remove	Is there an exit strategy?
Partner led	Can The City take a back seat to launching and operating?
Scoring Criteria	
Family & Diversity Friendly	Is it fun and inclusive?
Return on Investment	Is it low cost or high excitement?
Longevity / Sustainability	Will the materials last?
Feasible	Will implementation go well and stay looking good?
Meets community or ecological need	Does someone want or need this?

Attachment 4 includes three sample projects that demonstrate how these criteria could help encourage and guide potential partners to successfully deliver activations of unused spaces along the LRT ROWs.

While the ideas presented focus on the potential value to communities, removal is also discussed. There are several tools and mechanisms that can be used to ensure an effective exit from a site, including relocating the use to another site in the community, incorporating the use into the future life of the site, or simply ending the project. By considering relocation or incorporation as possible exit strategies, The City and partners can gain additional value from interim use projects by considering them experiments to prototype and refine ideas in advance of more significant investment.

Conclusion

There are opportunities for The City of Calgary to allow interim use of future LRT rights-of-way by partner organizations. Given that the scope and duration of these projects are expected to be more significant than previous activation programs, Administration recommends a pilot phase with one or more projects to better understand the internal process requirements and level of interest from partner organizations before creating an intake mechanism to open the full inventory of City-owned parcels to partner-led project proposals.

Stakeholder Engagement, Research and Communication

This report has been developed internally based on a technical review of transportation options and learnings from recent activation projects including the ActivateYYC microgrant program and other City initiatives such as This Is My Neighbourhood, and the Green Line Event Framework. For non-transportation projects, pilot projects will assist The City in understanding the level of public engagement required to allow partner organizations to activate City land on an interim basis.

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Strategic Alignment

This report supports the citizen priority of A City of Inspiring Neighbourhoods by enhancing transportation options for neighbourhoods in advance of major transit infrastructure, and by allowing local partners to work with residents to use otherwise empty parcels of land while addressing community needs.

This report is also in alignment with The City's Investing in Partnership Policy and the Council approved Pedestrian Strategy, particularly Action 17: "Establish a Tactical Urbanism program to facilitate public requests for creative projects to activate streets as places and to support the non-traditional use of the road right-of-way."

Social, Environmental, Economic (External)

Social

Unused spaces can attract social disorder. Activating unused spaces can enhance community engagement by creating gathering places, opportunities for positive social interaction, and increasing the perception of safety.

Environmental

Interim uses can contribute ecologically. Site activations can provide opportunities for residents to meet their needs locally, potentially reducing vehicular travel and encouraging active living, but can also draw additional traffic if they are meeting regional needs.

Economic

Unutilized rights-of-way require maintenance without generating revenue or providing value to the community. Interim uses can serve evolving community needs and raise a community's profile. Partnerships and low-cost leasing of land can incubate future local businesses.

Financial Capacity

Current and Future Operating Budget:

The operating budget impact of future rapid transit expansion projects considered in this report will be addressed in the RouteAhead Project Prioritization Report. Administration proposes delivering non-transportation uses through a partner-driven process. Pilot projects to evaluate the proposed framework will require some staff time and resources to support and evaluate. Project proposals will be assessed for budgetary impacts prior to approval.

Current and Future Capital Budget:

Capital budget implications of future rapid transit expansion projects will be addressed in the RouteAhead Project Prioritization Report. Pilot projects to evaluate the proposed framework are not anticipated to require capital budget. If a pilot project did require capital investment (e.g. to create a utility connection to a project site) the project would be required to obtain approval prior to advancing.

Risk Assessment

As with any partnership, projects in future Transit ROWs are subject to the capacity of the partner to successfully deliver the project. Sites may need remediation if partners lose the

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capacity to bring their projects to completion. The various partnership mechanisms outlined in Attachment 2 provide tools to mitigate these risks.

A unique risk associated with allowing interim uses on future Transit ROWs is the potential that adjacent residents and communities become emotionally invested in the interim use and as a result resist or challenge the Council-approved intended uses for the site. To mitigate this risk, the project evaluation framework presented in Attachment 4 places a high priority on including an appropriate exit strategy.

REASON(S) FOR RECOMMENDATION(S):

Interim transit uses on future Blue Line and Green Line LRT lands will be evaluated through the RouteAhead update. This process provides the best opportunity to assess the feasibility, return on investment, timelines, and prioritization while ensuring a consistent methodology.

Introducing non-transportation uses on future LRT lands can be informed by previous experience allowing short term activations. New pilot projects will allow The City to explore the effectiveness of long-term activations and provide an opportunity to refine the framework presented in this report before formalizing a process to manage and promote these activities.

ATTACHMENT(S)

1. Attachment 1 – Potential Rapid Transit Expansion Projects for Future LRT Rights-of-Way
2. Attachment 2 – Parcels – A framework for evaluating candidate parcels for alternative use, and sample parcels within the future Blue Line and Green Line rights-of-way
3. Attachment 3 – Partners – A summary of mechanisms from the City's Partnership Strategy that support activation of future transit rights-of-way
4. Attachment 4 – Possibilities – A framework for evaluating project ideas and sample ideas for activating future transit rights-of way