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OnTrack Response to SMP “Update” No. 2 (Also posted at www.monorailontrack.org)

On June 14, 2005, the Seattle Monorail Project (SMP) sent another e-mail “update,” providing a description (*in italics*) of stations and the station design process and a discussion of the reduced number of stations for the Green Line. OnTrack’s comments appear in **bold**.

OnTrack overview

The SMP continues to spin reductions and compromises of the Green Line as *positive changes*. In this “update,” the SMP promotes two compromises as improvements:

- 1. replacement of glass-enclosed stations designed to reflect neighborhood character (you will recall the beautiful pre-election drawings) with bare bones open-air stations and**
- 2. a reduction in the total number of stations from 19 to 16.**

These changes are driven more by the increasing financial difficulties facing the Monorail Project—a 30% shortfall in revenues and a 20% increase in project costs—than by design aesthetics.

Station Design Concept and Process

One of the first things SMP did in 2003 was to talk with communities along the route about how they wanted the Green Line to serve their neighborhoods....In May 2003, we held four public “Vision and Values” workshops specifically related to station design.... We also talked with the communities about their values in the areas of environmental quality and sustainability, and asked them what role the station should play in their neighborhood.

The Monorail Project frequently touts its hundreds of community meetings, including design meetings, as evidence of its transparency and openness to public input. The new station designs in the proposed contract will look nothing like what was discussed at community meetings—or like those presented to the City’s Monorail Review Panel. It is now clear that community meetings and SMP’s commitment to building a system that matches the “vision and values” of the neighborhoods along the Green Line were, at best, a waste of time and money if not misleading.

After these workshops, we directed our architecture team to build a set of technical requirements and specifications to include in the Request for Proposals (RFP)..... At the direction of the two architects on the SMP Board, we issued an RFP addendum in July 2004 that clarified that the Contractor Teams had freedom to propose station designs that best worked with their own technology, met the SMP's technical requirements, and fit well into the communities. These Board members wanted to insure that alternative ideas that would add even more value would be considered by the Contractor Teams.

The SMP spent \$2.3 million on designs that will never be built. If open-air cookie cutter uniform stations are indeed better for the Green Line, why were they not discussed or presented to the public and why did the SMP spend so much money on abandoned designs?

The timing of changes to the RFP is telling. If the SMP were truly interested in “alternative ideas that would add even more value,” why did it wait until less than a month before the proposals were due to make the change to the RFP and act without any public discussion? In fact, removing design requirements from the RFP permitted the contractor to decrease the cost of stations in a last minute effort to offset increasing costs in other aspects of the project.

One of the changes regarding station requirements in the July Addendum #5 was the reduction of minimum platform size from 130 feet to 90 feet. Smaller platforms mean reducing the size of trains from three cars to two cars, effectively cutting system capacity by one third. A compromise on station size and design saves money on building and maintenance, but also leads directly to a reduction in system service, capacity, and ultimately fare collections, which will be the primary source of operating revenues after 2020.

Open-Air Stations

Of course, the stations will have roofs and weather protection, and, by moving toward an open-air design, they will require less material to build and less energy to operate and maintain.

The comfortableness of stations is important given that wait times between trains has been increased by other compromises in the contract. Rather than waiting for peak hour trains that come every four minutes in buildings with walls, Green Line passengers will now have to wait at least eight minutes in buildings without walls. The result is a tangible decrease in the quality of service provided to Seattleites. The prospect of waiting longer in stations with fewer amenities will likely discourage some people from using the monorail, undermining the SMP's goal of getting people out of their cars and reducing fare revenues which makes the goal of self-sufficiency by 2020 even more unattainable.

Station Integration into Neighborhoods

The technical requirements are the same (quality of materials, elements of continuity, etc.), the intent to incorporate distinctive community character into each station is the same (ongoing community involvement in the design of the station rooftops, the materials seen by the community, art, landscaping, etc.) but the stations will no longer be entirely enclosed structures.

The key word in this sentence is “intent.” The SMP intends “to incorporate distinctive community character into each station,” but it is not *committed* to do so, nor has it required the contractor to individualize stations so that they can better integrate into communities. There is little reason to expect anything other than standardized stations that do little if anything to enhance surrounding neighborhoods.

While the station designs have evolved, the basic technical requirements remain. These requirements include bike racks at every station, platform safety doors, closed-circuit TV for security monitoring, elevators that provide greater accessibility for all, audible and tactile signs and other ‘wayfinding’ aids to ensure ease-of-use for people with disabilities, and compliance with CPTED (Crime Prevention through Environmental Design) principles.

Missing from this list of requirements is escalators. Stations along the Green Line will have only elevators and stairs to transport people up and down two to eight stories. Escalators are the most efficient means of moving large numbers of people quickly and smoothly. Imagine the SeaTac airport without escalators. Without escalators, the stations can be smaller and cheaper, but they will not serve passengers as well. The SMP claim that the elevators, which were always included to accommodate handicapped passenger, will be high speed is not true. High speed elevators are feasible in high rise buildings, but not in structures that have only a few floors because they do not have time to accelerate and decelerate.

Number of Stations

The agreement negotiated by the SMP staff includes 16 stations. The SMP decided to recommend that the Green Line start with two fewer than the 19 stations we’ve been discussing in order to increase the funds available for allowances, reserves and contingencies. We feel that there is a higher priority to ensure the completion of a 17-station, 14-mile Monorail system (with the opportunity to build the additional stations later) than to accept slightly more risk to build a 19-station system from the outset.

The need to save money by eliminating two stations and reducing service to the areas around those stations highlights the financial difficulties facing the Monorail Project. The money that would have been spent building stations at Elliot & Mercer and Avalon & 35th will instead go into the contingency fund—a fund that roughly \$55 million short even with these additional monies (see OnTrack Response No. 1 posted at www.monorailontrack.org).

The two deferred stations are Avalon & 35th and Elliott & Mercer. These are two of the lowest ridership stations in the most recent 2030 ridership analysis completed with the City of Seattle. Also, both locations will have Monorail stations relatively nearby that riders can use until the two future stations are built.

While these two stations are projected to carry the fewest passengers, they would have accommodated up to 1000 trips per day. Service for those passengers has been sacrificed. In both cases, the nearest station is more than a half a mile away and up a steep hill.

The SMP already owns the property for these two stations and, when building the Green Line....

Now that the stations will not be built, what will happen to the property SMP as acquired? Will this reduction in service for Seattleites translate into a boon for real estate investors?

Second and Madison Station

The station on Second Avenue between Spring and Madison is important for serving a key part of downtown Seattle. Currently, the Federal Reserve Bank owns and operates a facility on that site. The SMP has set aside funds to purchase the property and build a station at that site. Our goal is to have this station up and running when the Green Line opens, but we cannot make that promise until we have a clearer understanding of the Federal Reserve's timing and until we own the property.

The 2nd and Madison Station – the only one between Pine Street and Pioneer Square – is the signature downtown station serving the ferry terminal (three blocks away) and the financial district. If this station, projected to be the fourth highest volume station in the system, is not to be built or comes online after the opening of the Green Line, ridership studies need to be updated to reflect this reduction in service.

To secure the station site at 2nd and Madison, the SMP will have to purchase the entire parcel now occupied by the Federal Reserve. The Federal Reserve will put the property on the open market and expects to receive \$20 million for the site – it will not sell less than the entire site. Given the SMP's 30% revenue shortfall and 20% project cost overruns, it is not clear there will be sufficient funds to purchase this property and build this station.

As the SMP issues its periodic updates in coming months, OnTrack will continue to respond to clarify issues and highlight areas of the project needing public attention and scrutiny.