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THE POTLUCK

Audit paints scathing picture of Met Council's oversight of Southwest Light Rail construction

BY: MICHELLE GRIFFITH - MARCH 15, 2023 2:57 PM



📷 Southwest Light Rail project spokesperson Trevor Roy (R) walks with a person on a bridge constructed for the light rail line during a tour. The 14.5-mile line, scheduled to open in 2027, faces cost overruns. Photo by H. Jiahong Pan/Minnesota Reformer.

A new report by the Office of the Legislative Auditor released Wednesday found that the Metropolitan Council made numerous errors overseeing the construction of the Southwest Light Rail Green Line extension, which is nearly a decade behind schedule and \$1.5 billion over budget.

Among the problems: Moving ahead knowing they didn't have sufficient funding, changing construction plans that delayed the project and not adequately communicating about the light rail's increasing costs.

The Southwest Light Rail line, also known as the Green Line extension, will connect downtown Minneapolis to Eden Prairie, Hopkins, Minnetonka and St. Louis Park, traveling 14.5 miles. A September audit already investigated how the [project went over budget and past schedule](#).

Wednesday's [audit](#) analyzed the Met Council – the local governmental agency overseeing the Green Line extension and whose members are appointed by the governor – and how it's been unclear about its estimates of increased construction costs.

“We recommend the Metropolitan Council provide clearer information to legislators, the public, and interested stakeholders about what it does not know,” the report states.

Legislators on Wednesday were quick to criticize the Met Council and the project. Democrats released a statement saying the body relied on assumptions and nonprofessional judgment about how much future construction would cost.

“The Metropolitan Council has no mechanisms to feel accountable to the public in any way whatsoever. That has caused haphazard management of the project,” Rep. Frank Hornstein, DFL-Minneapolis, and Sen. Scott Dibble, DFL-Minneapolis, said in a statement. They've offered a bill that would change the governing structure of the Met Council so that members would stand for election.

Republicans called for the disbandment of the Met Council altogether.

“One thing is clear after the audit today: the wasteful spending and obfuscation by the Metropolitan Council during the planning and construction of Southwest Light Rail, and their slowness to comply with the (Office of the Legislative Auditor) requests, means their time wasting our taxpayers' dollars should come to an end,” said Sen. Mark Koran, R-North Branch, in a statement.

The Met Council in early 2022 estimated that it needs another \$764 million to complete the project. The Office of the Legislative Auditor said the Met Council's \$764 million estimate is flawed and rests in the middle range of how much more money is needed. In other words, the Met Council may still need more money beyond the \$764 million.

Construction on the Southwest Green Line expansion is over 70% complete and is expected to begin service in 2027. Its original opening date was

supposed to be in 2018.

The Office of the Legislative Auditor plans to release another report in the spring that focuses on the Met Council's oversight of contractors.

The light rail's struggles are not unique among big infrastructure projects around the country. A [slimmed down high-speed rail project in California](#) is now expected to be \$10 billion over budget. New York Gov. Kathy Hochul [canceled plans](#) for a rail link to New York City's LaGuardia Airport this week after cost estimates ballooned to \$2.4 billion.



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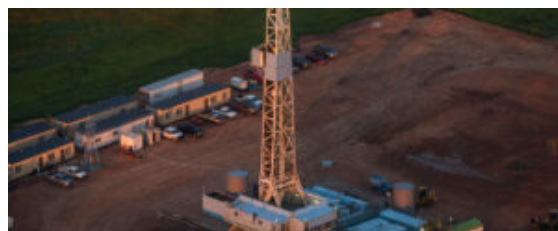
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