

On trains, teachers, broadband and more ...

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'VERY, VERY, VERY, VERY CLOSE'

The train called Central Corridor, still but a line on a map, revved its imaginary engines and moved, ever so slightly, toward its destination on Thursday. Peter Bell, chairman of the Metropolitan Council, and Kathleen O'Brien, a University of Minnesota vice president, said they are close — several "verys" preceded the word "close" — to resolving their differences.

Close, but not there yet. A deep breath was taken by many attending the meeting of Corridor-watchers called by state Rep. Alice Hausman, DFL-St. Paul, at the State Office Building.

"I was hoping to pop champagne corks and celebrate," Hausman said. No corks were popped. The U and the Met Council will meet again next week to try to resolve differences over how the train can bisect campus without affecting sensitive research equipment.

By mid-December, Bell said, the federal funding process begins to crank up, and the Corridor, an 11-mile light-rail link from downtown St. Paul to downtown Minneapolis, needs to put its bid in for inclusion in the next budget. An accord with the U, and an end to the U's lawsuit over the project, are necessary.

Hennepin County Commissioner Peter McLaughlin said negotiations are moving ahead and have graduated from technical issues to legal language. "We've gone from science to lawyering here," he said. "That's not comforting," cracked St. Paul Mayor (and lawyer) Chris Coleman.

Bell: "We're very, very, very, very close" on the big issues, including the impact of the train's vibration and electromagnetic interference on equipment. O'Brien on getting the Board of Regents to sign on: "When we have an agreement, we'll convene the board to sign on." Hausman: "The lack of a deadline that holds, or has clout, concerns me."

The two sides agreed to advise Hausman next week, who would advise the Corridor-watchers on when corks might be popped or another meeting called to help push the train down another few feet of imaginary track.

BUSH BETS ON TEACHERS

Those of us who have sought a closer connection between smart people in our "higher" and "lower" education systems were glad to see the union achieved at the behest of the Bush Foundation on Thursday.

The foundation and the major teacher-training institutions in the region announced a plan to produce better K-12 teachers in the next decade and to support them in their critical first years in the classroom. Bush is investing more than \$40 million in the effort.

"Nothing makes a bigger difference than the effectiveness of the teacher," said Bush Foundation president Peter Hutchinson, whose varied career includes a stint running the Minneapolis public school system. Hutchinson said when the Bush board decided to focus on raising student achievement, particularly among minority students, the decision was made to focus on reforming the way teachers are trained.

Hutchinson said 40 percent of the 72,000 teachers in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota will be retiring in the next decade. The goal is to try to replace them with teachers trained under a system that emphasizes recruiting candidates more selectively, providing more opportunities for in-classroom learning, placing them in situations where they are likely to succeed and supporting them with mentors for up to five years.

The array of institutions involved in the effort, which is to begin in the next school year, was impressive. It included the University of Minnesota, North Dakota State University, St. Cloud State University, the University of South Dakota, Augsburg College, Bethel College, Concordia University-St. Paul, Hamline University, Minnesota State-Mankato, Minnesota State-Moorhead, St Catherine University, University of St. Thomas, Valley City (N.D.) State University and Winona State University.

Earl Potter, president of St. Cloud State, said it will mean St. Cloud will "narrow enrollment" in education programs and move to more hands-on experience, which he called a "co-teaching model." Judith Ramaley, president of Winona State, says local school officials will help design curriculum for those training to be teachers. Concordia president Robert Holst said the training of teachers must involve the diverse cultural experiences of today's students.

This seems a focused effort that could make a difference, especially when it is tailored toward communities that student-teachers will eventually be working in. And we see it as evidence that the state's higher-ed leaders are becoming strong advocates for student achievement in Minnesota's elementary, middle and secondary schools.

INNOVATION AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Further on the education front: Charter schools are public schools, funded by taxpayers just like St. Paul Central High School or any other public school. We understand that they are prohibited by law from using state funds to purchase land or buildings.

Yet that seems like what several have done.

We are indebted to the reporting of the Star Tribune, which ran a story on Sunday about how certain charter schools have set up affiliated construction companies that used state funds to erect new buildings. Some of the deals were financed with high-interest "junk bonds" and produced fees to the dealmakers and even to some of the charter school officials.

The existence of these affiliated companies has been an issue for some time, and the Legislature passed some new regulations this year. State Sen. Kathy Saltzman, DFL-Woodbury, said she will convene her Senate Charter Schools Subcommittee to look at the problem. She expressed concern about the operation of these building corporations and said this is an example of "what happens when there isn't oversight."

She emphasized — and so do we — that problems with a few charters should not lessen the state's commitment to the charter-school movement. But this raises an interesting question.

After all, avoidance of bureaucratic oversight was one of the reasons Minnesota pioneered charter schools in the early 1990s. These were to be laboratories of innovation, open to all without charge, that would be freed from many of the strictures that govern "regular" public schools. Is the price of that freedom — which has produced some real education innovation — acceptance of some equally "innovative" ways to fund school buildings?

BROADER BROADBAND

Surrounded by old media (books!) and framed by huge, high columns of Kettle River sandstone, several dozen concerned citizens gathered in downtown St. Paul Thursday to talk about megabits and the digital rails they run on.

The subject was broadband, which refers, essentially, to high-speed Internet capacity. The setting was the Great Reading Room of the James J. Hill Reference Library. The point of the meeting, sponsored by Ramsey County, the City of St. Paul and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, was to encourage collaborative action on making better use of broadband, and expanding access to it.

Among the speakers was Rick King, an executive with Thomson-Reuters and chair of the governor's Ultra High Speed Broadband Task Force. We took note of that group's report of a few weeks back, with appreciation for the utility of its metaphors as much as for its particulars. King reiterated one of those metaphors on Thursday: Think of broadband, he said, as "transportation infrastructure." His point: More goods and services (from business documents and education materials to medical data and movies) are moving on broadband highways already — and so much more could.

Another speaker, Paula Ellis, vice president of the Knight Foundation, talked about how important to democracy access to information is. Access to the Internet these days, she said, is access to opportunity. And, as much as has changed in the digital world in the past 20 years or so, "this is an information revolution that's only in its infancy," she said.

Kim Marcille, executive director of the Miami-Dade Broadband Coalition, came up to talk about building public-private partnerships that pay off. In addition to expanding access to fast Internet connections, she said, she concentrates on economic development and sustainability — or, "how do you make it pay for itself?"

That's a good way to think, especially now, in our moment of deep deficits. Cost-justification — quantifying a necessary, achievable return on an investment — has a way of focusing the mind on real possibilities. In tight times, it also helps to break down bureaucratic barriers.

Ellis is right: The information revolution has only just begun. To arms!

CALLING A CAMPAIGN TO ACCOUNT

The battle over instant runoff voting in St. Paul continues even after the measure won approval from city voters. A panel of Administrative Law judges ruled Nov. 30 that supporters of the charter amendment made false claims in their brochures and should be fined \$5,000.

On Nov. 3, the measure to switch to IRV for future municipal elections won 17,083 votes, or 52.5 percent, compared with 15,486, or 47.5 percent, opposed.

Acting on a complaint by opponents of the measure, the panel ruled that amendment supporters falsely claimed the ballot question was supported by the Democratic-Farmer-Labor party and by the League of Women Voters of St. Paul and Minnesota, and also by national leaders such as President Obama and Sen. John McCain, who had not given their permission.

Both claims were included in election mailings. The panel said: "The timing of these mailings made it difficult for opponents to respond before the election and created an unfair advantage." It said violations by the pro-IRV group were "multiple and deliberate. They were made despite the clarity of the statutory prohibitions." The judges said the group "remains completely unapologetic."

FairVote Minnesota, the statewide organization that supported the St. Paul effort, issued a statement saying "the errors were technicalities and were certainly unintentional."

We did not support the measure but believe we can live with it. We understand that election laws are complex. But both sides are expected to know them and follow them, "technicalities" and all. In this case, it appears the group that wanted to change our elections did not follow the rules all sides must play by to ensure that the voting is fair.

OPINIONETTES

A shout out to **the aforementioned Peter Bell**, Met Council chairman. Bell late last month was elected to the board of the **TCF Financial Corp.**, which is based in Wayzata and has more than \$17 billion in total assets. In addition to his Met Council experience, Bell has been a University of Minnesota regent and an executive with Hazelden and TCF.

We mourn the death of **Lloyd Hackl**, who died in Arizona last month at the age of 73. He was an English instructor at **Century College** in White Bear Lake prior to his retirement in 1997. He was also an **F. Scott Fitzgerald** buff of the first order, and delighted in giving tours of F. Scott haunts in St. Paul, where the author grew up. His book, "**F. Scott Fitzgerald and St. Paul - 'Still Home to Me,'**" reconstructs those St. Paul years. That we know so much about **Fitzgerald and St. Paul**, and the city's effect on his writing, is due to Lloyd Hackl, who cared deeply about both.

Further, may tender be the night, Opinundo sayeth not.