

METRO LINE TO BLATCHFORD OPERATING OPTIONS

Recommendation

That the September 20, 2023, City Operations report CO01885, be received for information.

Requested Action	Information only		
ConnectEdmonton's Guiding Principle	ConnectEdmonton Strategic Goals		
CONNECTED This unifies our work to achieve our strategic goals.	Urban Places		
City Plan Values	ACCESS.		
City Plan Big City Move(s)	A community of communities	Relationship to Council's Strategic Priorities	Mobility Network
Corporate Business Plan	Serving Edmontonians		
Council Policy, Program or Project Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • City Plan • Metro Line Northwest LRT • Blatchford vision • Mass Transit Network 		
Related Council Discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CR_1123rev, Blatchford Concept Plan Implementation Analysis - Project Business Case, City Council, June 10, 2014 • CR_3314, Long Term Funding Plan for the LRT - Strategic Options, Extension Planning and Proposed Stages of Construction, City Council, May 3, 2016 • CR_5457, Metro Line LRT (NAIT to Blatchford) - Crossing Assessments and Concept Plan, City Council, March 21, 2018 • CR_5870, LRT Network Expansion Progress Update, Executive Committee, June 18, 2018 • IIS00094, LRT Network Expansion and Renewal Update, Executive Committee, November 9, 2020 • IIS01335, Progress Land Development at Blatchford, Executive Committee, October 12, 2022 		

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Executive Summary

- The Metro Line Light Rail Transit (LRT) extension to Blatchford consists of a 1.6 kilometre extension from the new permanent Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT) station to Blatchford Gate station to serve the future Blatchford community.
- Construction of the extension is expected to be completed by the end of 2023 and handed over to operations by Q1 2024. Operating funding is required starting in 2024 for the operations and maintenance of the LRT extension assets, once the extension is ready for service commencement.
- Administration has developed two scenarios for funding operations and identified benefits and tradeoffs to be considered in each scenario.
- Scenario one includes the full extension operating to Blatchford Gate station and requires \$4.23 million in annual operating funding, starting in 2024. Scenario two includes opening the new permanent NAIT station and deferring the opening of Blatchford Gate station until service is warranted at this location. Scenario two requires \$2.43 million in annual operating funding, starting in 2024.

REPORT

As part of the 2023-2026 budget deliberations, Administration presented a funded service package to fully operate the Metro Line to Blatchford extension starting in 2024. At that time, Council decided to not fund the operation of the extension and defer this decision to a later date. Administration committed to providing a follow up to Council prior to the Fall 2023 Supplemental Operating Budget Adjustment.

The Metro Line Northwest LRT corridor (NAIT to Campbell Road) was approved by Council as part of the long-term LRT Network Plan in 2009, and the Concept Plan for the LRT corridor was approved by Council in 2014. After the temporary NAIT station went into operation in 2015, the Metro Line NAIT to Blatchford extension was established as one of two LRT construction priorities by Council in 2016. In September 2016, the City of Edmonton received federal funding to complete preliminary design for the Metro Line segment running from NAIT to Blatchford Road through the Government of Canada's Public Transit Infrastructure Fund as well as provincial match funding.

Phase one of the project is the 1.6 kilometre extension from NAIT to Blatchford and consists of two new stations - the new permanent NAIT station (replacing the temporary NAIT station that went into operation in 2015) and the Blatchford Gate station. As the Blatchford development matures, this segment of the Metro Line Northwest LRT will support transit access for residents and businesses in the Blatchford area and advance City Plan goals around mode shift and energy transition.

Blatchford Gate station will serve the future development of the Blatchford area and features a "transit mall" - a street which limits vehicle traffic and includes a pedestrian sidewalk and commuter cycle track running adjacent to the LRT tracks. The station will also serve the Westwood neighbourhood east of 107 Street through a shared-use path between the

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neighbourhood and the station. The new NAIT station will continue to serve the NAIT campus and surrounding neighbourhoods, including Kingsway Mall. The new station is slightly larger than the temporary station and will enable the future option of using five-car trains, should ridership demand require it.

Construction on the Metro Line to Blatchford extension started in 2020 and will be completed by the end of 2023. Remaining construction work for 2023 includes NAIT and Blatchford utility complexes, installation of the overhead catenary system poles, solar panels at the NAIT and Blatchford Stations, installation of signals and sidewalks, and landscaping work. Once construction work is completed, testing and commissioning of this portion of the LRT line will commence and the new extension could go into service in Q1 2024. The existing temporary NAIT station is scheduled to be decommissioned in 2024 after the extension is in service.

Blatchford Development

Approved by Council in 2010, the vision for Blatchford is to be a sustainable urban development that uses 100 per cent renewable energy, is carbon neutral and empowers residents to pursue a sustainable lifestyle. As outlined in the October 12, 2022, Executive Committee report IIS01335, Progress Land Development at Blatchford, Blatchford advances the strategic direction of The City Plan to grow Edmonton into a healthy, urban and climate resilient city of two million people. The Blatchford-NAIT-Kingsway node was identified in The City Plan as one of the city's six major nodes. The community is designed to foster connectivity, vibrant public spaces, economic growth and support sustainable, active modes of transportation. It includes a direct network of pathways, roads and parks that will create a seamless experience to connect to the Blatchford Gate and NAIT LRT stations. Blatchford Gate station is located in Blatchford East, while NAIT station is located in the town centre, adjacent to East Stage 5/NAIT of the Blatchford Redevelopment Plan (Attachment 1).

Blatchford is planned to have approximately 11,000 to 12,000 residences by 2042 to accommodate 30,000 Edmontonians living in the neighbourhood. An update on the land development progress was also provided in report IIS01335. As outlined in the report, the community was ready for home construction on the west side in 2018. At the time of the report 33 parcels of land (57.43 acres) within the first four stages of development were either sold or pending sale. Administration continues to actively market the community and pursue land sales with home builders for the development of the town centre and residential areas.

Criteria Guiding Service Commencement

Decisions regarding when and how to introduce transit service are guided by City Policy C539A - Transit Service Policy and the Transit Service Standards Administrative Procedure. The Transit Service Standards provide criteria for when there is sufficient development in an area to warrant consideration of the introduction of transit service. These criteria include thresholds around the number of residents and employees within the area, as examples, as this influences whether there is sufficient activity and ridership to support transit service.

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Metro Line to Blatchford Operating Options

Two scenarios for operating support after the extension have been developed, and there are benefits and tradeoffs in both scenarios.

Scenario 1 - Operate the full Metro Line extension to Blatchford Gate station

This option would see both the new permanent NAIT station and Blatchford Gate station opening, along with service commencement, in the first quarter of 2024, as originally planned. There are several potential benefits of operating Blatchford Gate station including:

- Providing greater access to people wanting to access the industrial and residential neighbourhoods east of the station.
- Meeting commitments to Edmontonians to transition major infrastructure projects from construction to operations when construction concludes.
- Allow for the utilization of the one-year warranty period for the infrastructure and equipment used.

There are also tradeoffs with opening the extension, including service provision not aligning with transit service standards; projected low ridership; and lower activity and natural surveillance in the area which could lead to elevated security disorder risks and inappropriate use of the station. This could be perceived by Edmontonians as not a prudent use of operating funding. In addition, scenario one does not align with the criteria for service commencement set out in Policy C539A and the Transit Service Standards Administrative Procedure. In this scenario, the operating costs include (Attachment 2):

- LRT operations.
- Maintenance of the new stations, new tracks, utility complexes, signalling system, LRT catenary, substations and new communications system.
- Safety and security staffing and equipment required to monitor the new stations.
- Maintenance of the NAIT plaza, landscaping, snow removal and traffic signals.

Scenario 2 - Defer opening Blatchford Gate station

In the second scenario, Metro Line LRT service would transition from the temporary NAIT station to the new NAIT station, but the opening of Blatchford Gate station would be deferred until the criteria for the service assessment - outlined above to support ridership - is met. In this scenario, the new permanent NAIT station would still replace the temporary NAIT station during the first quarter of 2024, by which time the temporary station will have surpassed its useful life.

This scenario has several benefits, including reducing operating costs (Attachment 2) associated with a station that will not be well used, and reducing the risk of security issues and inappropriate use of the Blatchford Gate station. There are also tradeoffs, including removing the opportunity to test station infrastructure and equipment during the one-year warranty period; however, the risk of needing to access the warranty period may be low and the impact can be offset by cost reductions from not operating to the Blatchford Gate station.

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While costs for LRT operations are no longer required, some costs will still be incurred to maintain and secure the infrastructure and assets (Attachment 2). Examples of these costs include:

- Station maintenance - although Blatchford Gate station would not open, facility assets and utility complexes for the two new stations would still need to be maintained. There would be a lower level of maintenance and utility costs applied.
- Track and signalling maintenance - maintenance and routine inspections are still required to ensure these assets are ready for future service.
- Safety and security - the ETS Control Centre costs are unchanged from scenario one, as monitoring and surveillance will still need to be conducted. The new Blatchford Gate station is in a more-isolated area and will not experience the same degree of natural surveillance that is provided by higher traffic volumes. This scenario also includes costs for fencing to restrict access to the non-operational station. Transit Peace Officer costs are lower in scenario two due to the Blatchford Gate station being fenced.

Overall, the cost savings in scenario two would be the result of reduced infrastructure maintenance costs and a 19 per cent decrease in the number of full-time equivalents (FTEs) required by 2026 (from 25.2 FTEs in scenario one to 16.2 FTEs in scenario two) (Attachment 2).

Should scenario two be approved for funding as part of the Fall 2023 Supplemental Operating Budget Adjustments, Administration will regularly assess factors that would support opening the extension and return to Council, when deemed appropriate, with a recommendation to fund the remaining operating costs. This assessment would include consideration of several indicators aligned with Policy C539A and the Transit Service Standards Administrative Procedure and other factors, including:

- The number of residents living within 800 metres of the Blatchford Gate station in alignment with Transit Service Standards.
- The number of employees working within 800 metres of the Blatchford Gate station, in alignment with Transit Service Standards.
- Whether greenhouse gas emissions reduction from operating the extension is greater than not operating the extension.
- Emerging partnership opportunities with neighbouring institutions and organizations which would support ridership attraction.

The Metro Line LRT (NAIT to Blatchford) Extension capital project also included growth light rail vehicles (LRVs) which are part of the same purchase order as the renewal LRVs capital project approved by Council in the 2023-2026 budget. Maintenance funding for the growth LRVs has not been included in the service packages. The arrival of the new LRVs will start during the next budget cycle, at which time Administration will bring forward a service package to fund the operating costs for the growth LRVs.

Budget/Financial Implications

Administration has developed two scenarios for the operating impacts of the capital project. Scenario 1 would result in an annual operating requirement of \$4.23 million starting in 2024,

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while Scenario 2 would result in an annual operating requirement of \$2.43 million starting in 2024 (Attachment 2). One of these options must be funded during the Fall 2023 Supplemental Operating Budget Adjustment, as the infrastructure project will be complete at the end of 2023. If neither option is funded, Administration will not have the operating funding available to maintain and secure the new assets completed by the Metro Line LRT (NAIT to Blatchford) Extension capital project.

Administration will closely monitor security in both scenarios and depending on the number and severity of calls for service to Transit Peace Officer response, as an example, may return to Council in the future with additional security-related recommendations.

Community Insight

Since 2009, several community engagement activities have been conducted on Edmonton's LRT network expansion projects. For the Metro Line Northwest LRT this included 10 public engagement events with over 750 attendees, four public information sessions with more than 600 attendees, an online survey with over 1,200 survey respondents, 13 individual stakeholder meetings and four community pop-up events. Feedback collected through engagement activities supported the development of alignment, station areas and connections to communities. The preliminary design for the Metro Line LRT extension was approved by Council in January 2019.

In addition to wider engagement activities, Administration has reached out to 29 First Nations and Métis Nation communities and organizations to share information, arrange site visits, conduct ceremonies, and respond to questions, concerns and opportunities related to the Metro Line project. This Indigenous engagement has been a continuous process as development of the Metro Line and other LRT expansion projects expands.

GBA+

Expanding access to the LRT network in north Edmonton is a critical step in reducing mobility barriers to residents in north and northwest areas of Edmonton. Studies conducted by Statistics Canada show that communities in north Edmonton have a higher proportion of marginalized groups such as families experiencing low income levels, newcomers and seniors. Therefore, investing in and supporting the operation of LRT network expansions in north Edmonton fosters greater equity and inclusion among these communities.

This expansion will provide better access to faster and more efficient affordable transit options which connect communities to economic opportunities, education, social services and an overall improved quality of life. The nodes and corridors policies outlined in The City Plan have identified the northwest corridor as a priority for LRT expansion, with a focus on developing transit-oriented communities, which offer diverse opportunities for Edmontonians to live, work and play. In particular, the Blatchford community is an important urban hub which is a priority for investment to support equity, opportunity and connectedness.

Attachments

1. Blatchford Redevelopment Plan
2. Scenarios Financial Forecast Summary