

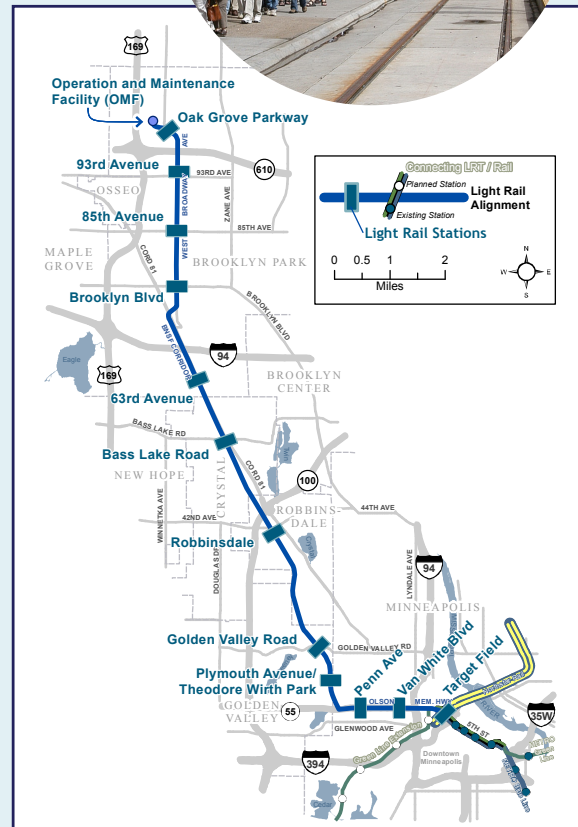
THE BLUE LINE COALITION

A unique partnership building power for equitable outcomes in North Minneapolis and the northwest suburbs

In 2013, regional leaders began envisioning and planning for the METRO Blue Line Extension, which will further connect North Minneapolis and the northwest suburbs with the Twin Cities' transit system. The Blue Line Extension is a \$1.5 billion infrastructure investment linking North Minneapolis and the northwest suburbs to regional opportunities, and will pass through several communities of color facing some of the region's worst racial disparities. Early discussions, however, proposed routes that bypassed important neighborhoods or routes that would have negative effects on communities of color along the corridor.

Staff and board members at the Jay and Rose Phillips Family Foundation of Minnesota grew concerned that affected community members were not involved enough in the planning process. The Phillips Foundation wanted to be sure the community was prepared to respond to opportunities and challenges before it was too late. The Foundation provided funding to Nexus Community Partners, a nonprofit community-building intermediary, to conduct a scan to determine who had the capacity to shape the Blue Line Extension.

In that scan, Nexus found that a critical mass of leaders from community-based organizations were committed to ensuring their communities were involved in the development of the Blue Line. These leaders had a vision for healthy, vibrant communities of opportunity where low-wealth people, people of color, new immigrants, and people living with disabilities could participate in and benefit from systems, decisions, and activities that shaped their neighborhoods.



The Blue Line Extension is a \$1.5 billion infrastructure investment linking North Minneapolis and the northwest suburbs.



*In partnership with the Phillips Foundation, Nexus convened community-based organizations that led to the **Blue Line Coalition**. This document details five lessons from this unique partnership between a private foundation, an intermediary organization, and a coalition of grassroots community organizations.*

1 USING AN INTERMEDIARY TO TAP INTO EXISTING COMMUNITY EXPERTISE

The Blue Line Coalition was uniquely primed for success because the people around the table had already built momentum in the community. As an intermediary, Nexus had relationships and insider knowledge that enabled it to tap into existing expertise, catalyzing the work of individual groups into the Blue Line Coalition. Partnering with Nexus allowed the Phillips Family Foundation to convene a group of dedicated, informed, talented organizers and community leaders who had grassroots capacity and were ready to secure community benefits from the planning and the construction of the Blue Line.

2 INVESTING WITH FLEXIBLE FUNDING

The Phillips Family Foundation provided flexible, multi-year funding to Nexus and the Blue Line Coalition with no strings attached. That meant there were no preconceived notions about what the coalition would achieve, who would be involved, or the outcomes it should work toward. There was also flexibility in the geographic focus of the strategy, allowing for a corridor-wide effort even though the Phillips Foundation primarily invests in North Minneapolis. Such an arrangement is atypical in the nonprofit world, where organizations usually must commit to specific outcomes, issues, and/or geographies at the outset of a grant period. Flexible funding enabled Nexus to convene the community-based partners to create the coalition's agenda instead of asking partners to commit to a pre-defined scope of work.

3

ALLOCATING DEDICATED PLANNING TIME BEFORE TAKING ACTION

Although the Blue Line Coalition was ready to hit the ground running because of the past work of individual organizations, Nexus used its convening role to allocate dedicated time for members to lay ground rules, establish values, and create a vision for the work. Nexus also secured consultant services to facilitate strategic planning and develop coalition priorities with members. This space to talk about shared principles served to deepen relationships and create a culture of accountability that contributed to the coalition's early success.

4

ESTABLISHING CHANNELS FOR MUTUAL LEARNING

Nexus and the Phillips Family Foundation understood that all partners—funder, intermediary, and community-based organizations—had something to learn from one another. The Phillips Family Foundation periodically invited Nexus and coalition members to present what they knew and what they were learning to the foundation's board of directors. All members brought relationships, community expertise, and on-the-ground connections that lent credibility to the coalition's advocacy efforts.

5

COMMITTING TO EVOLUTION

The Phillips Family Foundation and Nexus convened the Blue Line Coalition with clearly defined exit strategies. As the Blue Line Coalition strengthened and grew, Nexus and the Foundation realized it was time for a new structure and diversified sources of support for the Blue Line Coalition. The Phillips Family Foundation knew that the work must grow in the implementation phase, and that the coalition would therefore require additional sources of funding. Nexus knew that other community partners were better positioned for issue-based coalition organizing, so they sought out partners to take over the convening role. Knowing when to step back and let others lead has positioned the Blue Line Coalition for future success.



"Because Nexus is positioned at the intersection of community, philanthropy, & government, we're able to move across boundaries in a way most organizations can't."

- Nexus President & CEO
Repa Mekha (far left)

BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE

The flexible and accountable partnership between the Phillips Foundation, Nexus, and the Blue Line Coalition has built lasting power for residents of color in North Minneapolis, the northwest suburbs, and beyond. As the Blue Line Coalition transitions to a new organizational structure and expanded philanthropic support, its members remain united in their commitment to the plans they constructed together, the values they laid out for their work, and their shared mission to build power for equity and health for everyone living and working along the Blue Line. The knowledge, wisdom, creativity, and innovation coalition members have built together will lead the Blue Line Coalition well into the future.



THE RESULT: *Shifting power for better outcomes*

Infrastructure investments have historically not included pathways for community members—especially people of color and low-wealth people. Perhaps the greatest achievement of the Blue Line Coalition to date is challenging the power structures that have prevented people of color and low-wealth people from influencing infrastructure decisions in the past.

Accomplishments include:

- Securing two voting seats for Blue Line Coalition members at the Blue Line's Corridor Management Committee (CMC), an unprecedented level of power and participation for community leaders at that type of table.
- Earning two voting seats at Hennepin County's steering committee for a related community works program.
- Securing seats alongside city and county staff to select consultants conducting research and making recommendations on corridor business development and housing.
- Adding pedestrian safety features at a dangerous intersection.
- Garnering support from the cities of Minneapolis and Brooklyn Park to provide municipal consent for the transitway.
- Achieving recognition as a key corridor stakeholder and being included in multi-jurisdiction tables and actions hosted by Hennepin County.