

A bimonthly newsletter published by the Minnesota Public Transit Association.

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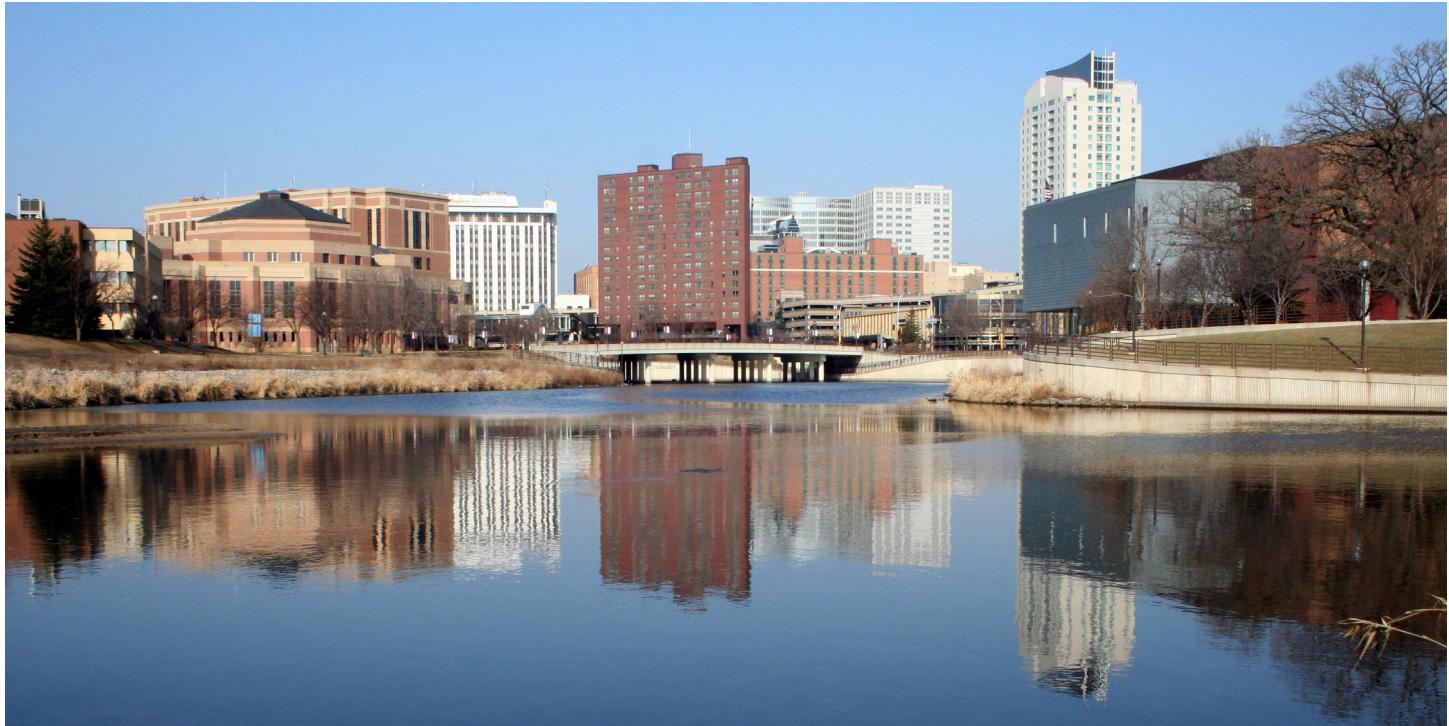
June 2016 Edition

Save the Date! MN Public Transit Conference & Expo

Creating Connections to Healthy Living

October 17-19, 2016

Mayo Civic Center
Rochester, MN



Lodging information at mpta-transit.org
Registration and more information coming soon!

President's Column

Craig Rempp

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Welcome to election season. Unfortunately, elections can make compromise and legislative results more difficult. This has become painfully clear in Minnesota as we have watched the failure of the legislature to enact major spending and tax bills including increases in ongoing revenue for transit.

The final days of the 2016 Legislative Session on May 22nd-23rd featured incredibly late work on bills, communications break-downs and a flurry of rushed activity that left only the supplemental budget bill enacted into law. The usual finger pointing ensued with both parties blaming the other for the lack of accomplishments this session. Of the four big bills on the table: the capital bonding bill, the transportation funding bill, the tax bill and the supplemental budget bill, only one has become law at this writing. Veteran politicos cannot remember a session that was more dysfunctional.



The governor, House Speaker and Senate Majority leader have been talking about a Special Session, but again, no agreement on whether or not that will happen. Stay tuned.

On a brighter note, Congress did pass the 5-year FAST Act surface transportation law and some MPTA board members made the trip out to Washington, D.C. as part of the Transportation Alliance Fly-In to thank members of the Minnesota Congressional delegation and learn more about how this new federal law will impact transit systems. It was a little strange to hear members of Congress wondering why the Minnesota legislature can't get its act together and fund transportation.

Thanks to LuAnn Bleiler from Paul Bunyan Transit for joining me along with Sherry Munyon and Tony Kellen as we advocated for transit in Minnesota with staff and Congressional members. We had a great opportunity to educate new staffers and remind Representatives and Senators about the important role that transit plays in Minnesota. We can always use a stronger presence so consider joining us on this fun and educational trip next year.

MPTA is working hard to plan our best Public Transit Conference! Be sure to mark your calendars – **October 17-19th in Rochester** and plan to learn great new strategies for accomplishing more while reconnecting with colleagues and finding new inspiration and enthusiasm for the great that we all do, all across the state. This year's theme: Connecting Communities to Healthy Living. We will focus on the great benefits of transit service to making communities healthy and attractive places to live and work. The folks in Rochester are planning huge changes to their community and transit will be absolutely necessary for making the new development a success.

Election season can seem daunting, but remember: it's our opportunity to hold public officials accountable. Make sure you take advantage of the chance to educate candidates about the critical need for increased transit service. MPTA is here to help you get the message across. As always, contact me at any time with questions, comments or concerns: craig.rempp@co.isanti.mn.us.

Craig Rempp

MPTA President

Legislative Report

Margaret Donahoe

There were meetings, discussions, hearings, proposals offered and exchanged and many events at which legislators assured us that transportation was a top priority and a plan would be passed, but in the end, the legislature and the governor could not agree on transportation funding.

The 2016 Legislative Session ended on May 23rd with no plan for increasing dedicated funding on an ongoing basis for transit, roads, bridges and other modes.

This year's session was unusually short with four major bills on the table: capital bonding, supplemental appropriations, tax changes and transportation funding. Of these four, only one has been signed into law by the governor: the supplemental appropriations bill. The tax bill was passed by both the House and Senate and sent to the governor but was not signed and so did not become law.

As soon as the session ended, with much chaos and drama at midnight on the last day to pass bills, there was speculation about the potential for a special session so the legislature could finish its work. Only the governor has the power to call a special session but once a session convenes, the legislature controls the agenda. Usually governors want agreement on a limited agenda prior to calling a special session. **Governor Dayton announced that he was open to calling a special session but legislative leaders would have to agree to a list of issues that he wants addressed ahead of time. That list includes additional funding for certain programs and projects including additional funding for metropolitan area transit. So far, there have been meetings and discussions but no agreement.**

The failure to pass a bonding bill is the biggest surprise. In only one year out of the last 30 has the legislature not passed a capital bonding bill in the even-year session. Bonding bills require a super majority to pass and so typically require broad support with projects in certain areas that will attract votes. This year the bills offered on the floor of the House and Senate did not receive enough votes. The Senate bill providing about \$1.5 billion in funding was one vote short and the House bill that provided about \$900 million in funding was significantly short of votes.

In an effort to salvage the situation, legislative leaders appointed a House/Senate conference committee to put together a bonding bill that both bodies would support. Negotiations on the bill continued right up until the last day of session. A final bill was not presented until very close to the midnight deadline on the floor of the House. Staff did not have time to even present the full text or allow printed amendments. The bill was quickly passed in the House and rushed over the Senate. The Senate amended the bill to allow the Hennepin County Regional Rail Authority to levy a higher tax to help fund the Southwest LRT line and was then passed and an effort was made to send it back to the House for repassage. The House adjourned a few minutes before midnight and so the bill could not be repassed by the House.



Thanks to the MPTA members who came to St. Paul for Transportation Day at the Capitol! We heard from Gov. Mark Dayton, Lt. Gov. Tina Smith (pictured), House Speaker Kurt Daudt, Senate Majority Leader Tom Bakk, MnDOT Commissioner Charlie Zelle, Metropolitan Council Chair Adam Duininck, Senate Transportation Committee Chair Scott Dibble, House Transportation Committee Chair Tim Kelly and other legislators.

Legislative Report

Margaret Donahoe

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The need for additional funding to keep the Southwest LRT project on track has become a major issue. Transitway projects in the metropolitan area follow a formula with 50% of capital costs from federal funds, 30% from the sales tax levied by the Counties Transit Improvement Board (CTIB), 10% from state funds and 10% from local funds. The state share at 10% for Southwest LRT is about \$135 million for a project that is estimated at \$1.3 billion. The state is in line to receive the needed federal funds if the other funding is committed. Getting the state funding has been the most difficult and there are concerns that unless the other funding is committed soon, the state could lose out to other regions of the country that are also seeking New Starts dollars.

The negotiations on the transportation funding bill – HF4 – were also sporadic and went down to the wire. A meeting of the conference committee was held on the second to last day of the session with a proposal from Chair Tim Kelly that apparently was not supported by the House Speaker or the full caucus. Senate Chair Scott Dibble also proposed a plan verbally but no further meetings were held and leaders of the two bodies decided to fall back on increasing the amount of funding in the bonding bill for transportation.

For transit, the last House offer would have provided the following increases over current funding:

- A ¼ cent local sales tax levied by the Metropolitan Council for bus capital and operations only except for the 50% state portion of operating costs for the blue LRT line and the green LRT line. The general fund appropriation for LRT operations would be eliminated.
- Authorization for the 5 CTIB counties to impose an additional ¼ cent local sales tax for use on roads, bridges or transit.
- Statutory dedication of 100% of the sales tax on leased vehicles providing an additional \$13.4 million per year for Greater Minnesota transit.

The last Senate proposal was pretty much the same as the House offer for transit but would have also provided an additional \$15 million per year in general funds for Greater Minnesota transit.

The capital bonding bill that almost passed included some transit funding:

- Metro Orange Line BRT - \$12.1 million
- Mall of America Transit Station - \$12 million
- Safe Routes to School – included in programs to be funded with a lump sum of \$100.5 M in general fund dollars.

The omnibus tax bill that was passed by the legislature but not signed into law contained authorization for the Metropolitan Council to issue regional bonds up to \$82.1 million with \$40.1 million in 2016 and the rest in 2017 to finance the Council's transit capital improvement plan.

Language governing providers of non-emergency medical transportation was signed into law. The language strikes the exemption from the special transportation services operating standards for common carriers operating under a fixed route and schedule, and replaces it with an **exception for public transit providers that receive financial assistance under the public transit participation program or from the Transportation Accessibility Advisory Committee.**

The new law clarifies in statute that the Commissioner of Transportation may prohibit a vehicle from being used in the provision of special transportation services if the vehicle fails to meet the operating standards found in Minnesota Rules, chapter 8840. Language clarifies that the Commissioner of Transportation may refuse to issue a certificate of compliance with the special transportation operating standards whenever an owner, controlling individual, or managerial official is disqualified.

The full text of the new law is available: [Chapter 164](#).

The final supplemental appropriations bill contains some funding for the Department of Administration for administrative costs to expand services provided under the Olmstead Plan for people with disabilities.

Without further action by the legislature, the 2016 session will be one of the least productive for transportation in Minnesota. With a big election coming up November 8th now is the time to talk to candidates about the critical need for action to improve transit service statewide. In addition to electing a new President, your US Representative, state senator, state representative and other local officials are all up for re-election. If we want support for transit in Minnesota, people need to educate candidates and work to have supportive people service in office. The issues that candidates talk about during the election tend to be the ones they focus in office. We need to make sure that transit and transportation are hot topics on the campaign trail and the need for action is clear!



2016 Washington, D.C. Fly-In

Transportation advocates from Minnesota traveled to Washington to visit directly with members of Congress and thank them for their work in passing the FAST Act – the five-year surface transportation authorization act passed in December.

Board members Craig Rempp, Chisago-Isanti Co. Heartland Express and LuAnn Bleiler, Paul Bunyan Transit joined MPTA Legislative Director Sherry Munyon in meetings with staff and members that highlighted transit funding needs.

Federal transit funding plays a critical role in providing the service Minnesotans need. Consider joining us at next year's Fly-In. It's a fun and important event for transportation in Minnesota.

METRO BUS the people picker-uppers News

Free Trolley Wednesday Nights June 15 to August 31

Submitted by BERTA HARTIG

ST. CLOUD — Thanks to a sponsorship by Quinlivan & Hughes, P.A., the Metro Bus trolley will run every Wednesday night from 5-9:25 pm for the Summertime by George! event June 15-Aug. 31. Cost is free to ride.

The trolley will make a loop between downtown and Lake George every 10 minutes, starting at 5 pm from the Metro Bus Transit Center, located at 510 1st St. S., St. Cloud. The last departure will leave at 9:25 pm from Lake George.

In addition to the Transit Center and Lake George, trolley stops are located near most downtown parking lots, River's Edge Convention Center and Paramount Theater. Trolley stops are identified with a special "Summertime by George! Free Trolley" sign. The route map is available at ridemetrobus.com.



MetroTransit News



A Line opening sparks curiosity, enthusiasm

By DREW KERR, edited by LAURA EASH

On June 11th, the first of a dozen planned rapid bus lines, the A Line, began service. It runs between Rosedale Center and the Blue Line's 46th Street Station on Snelling Avenue, Ford Parkway and 46th Street.

Service runs every ten minutes and trips are up to eight minutes faster than regular route buses. Trips are sped up through features like off-board fare payments, technology that lets A Line buses request longer green lights at intersections and by locating stations a half-mile apart.

A Line stations also have heat, light, displays with real-time NexTrip transit information and security features more commonly found on light-rail.

Bus operators picking up A Line customers for the first time enjoyed the ride. "What I like about it is it's very fluid," Operator Roosevelt Scott said.

Metro Transit General Manager Brian Lamb said a network of rapid bus lines would extend the benefits across the region. A planned network of 12 rapid bus lines on busy urban corridors could ultimately account for a third of Metro Transit's average weekday ridership.

"If you can't figure out how to move people and not just vehicles, we're not going to achieve what we want to achieve in this region," Lamb said.

There were 36,205 rides on the A Line and Route 84 during the first week of A Line service, a 36 percent increase from the week prior, when service was provided by the Route 84 only.



Shakopee Local Transit Service Improvements Begin

Submitted by ROBIN SELVIG

Last year, the MVTA conducted a study regarding the transit needs for northern Scott County. This study resulted in recommendations for local Shakopee service and included input from the public, stakeholders, drivers, transit-dependent populations and other available resources.

MVTA implemented the first of these recommendations effective May 23 with Routes 497 and 499, replacing Route 496.

Changes include:

- A more efficient routing that eliminates loops resulting in more direct travel time.
- Low/no ridership segments have been revised.
- Longer span of service, including later evening trips.
- Trips adjusted to accommodate business hours.
- Select trips serve Southbridge Crossings Park & Ride; provide more transfer opportunities at Marschall Road Transit Station.
- New destinations: Dean Lakes and bi-directional access to downtown.

“We are excited about these improvements,” said Shakopee Councilmember Michael Luce. “We believe they begin to address the needs of our local businesses as well as our residents who are trying to travel throughout our city.”

MVTA Implements “Language Line” to Assist Non-English Speaking Riders

Submitted by ROBIN SELVIG

The Minnesota Valley Transit Authority (MVTA) has implemented a “Language Line” to assist non-English-speaking transit riders in their effort to obtain accurate transit information.

MVTA Executive Director Luther Wynder stated, “This is a small, but effective way to assist transit riders for whom English is not their native language. Given the diversity of our ridership, we believe that this service will be very useful.”

Riders still call the MVTA at 952-882-7500, but when MVTA answers, callers should indicate what language is needed (such as Spanish, Mandarin, Russian, etc.). MVTA operators will then call the language line to obtain someone who can speak the necessary language and translate the question(s) for MVTA and translate MVTA’s answers for the rider.

This service is provided through the State of Minnesota MnIT Services on a per-call basis. Interpreters are available in some 170 languages.

Advancing Public Transit Starts With Volunteers

By SHELLY PFLAUM

I'd like to talk to the transit community about some of questions faced by rural public transit. Not all of these struggles are unique to rural areas, and my hope is that this discussion will engage, educate, and maybe even lead to a new course of action.

Let's open this discussion with a dose of reality. Public transportation will never be as convenient as driving your own vehicle. Even a perfectly run transit system that picks up 10 people will involve more waiting, arranging and accommodating than getting in your personal vehicle and going to work. It is an unavoidable caveat of mass transit.

In larger areas, transit systems reduce this inconvenience with frequency—sometimes stopping at a single location every 15 minutes. The rural geography and demographics where I work in Southwest Minnesota can't support a solution like that. We are too few and too spread out. So, what is the answer?

This is a question that has been asked and answered many times over the almost 3 decades that our five-county system, Community Transit, has been providing public transit. In the spirit of rural America, the one consistent answer has always been volunteer drivers.

Volunteers can take small numbers of people to their destination more cost-effectively than a bus that costs a minimum of \$50 an hour to operate. They can also cross county and state borders without obtaining any of the permissions or certifications that would be required of a bus service. Volunteer drivers are, literally, a lifeline to some people who need regular medical treatment.

It is irreplaceable, but volunteer transportation is also limited. Volunteer drivers, as we currently know them, drive their own vehicles, cannot transport wheelchairs, and are reimbursed for their mileage. Because it is not subsidized in any way, riders pay a mileage rate for every mile attached to their volunteer transportation, including any mileage between the driver's home and their home. This passenger fare is the only thing that sustains the volunteer driver program.

There are methods in place to reduce the cost of volunteer transportation. Passengers going in the same direction are scheduled together and charged a lower mileage rate whenever possible (there's that pesky wait time, again). But finding groups of people going in the same direction on the same day is harder than you would think. Volunteers are also sought from all over Southwest Minnesota to reduce mileage between passengers and drivers, but volunteers seem even sparser than the population.

Yet, if we could get a volunteer pool large enough, all of our current volunteer transportation could be done at a lower cost per trip. What if we found volunteers willing to donate mileage? Or stay overnight when needed? Trip cost could drop even lower.

There are many transportation doors closed right now because no one has the money to fashion the right key. Volunteers are not the answer to all the challenges of public transportation in rural Minnesota. Far from it. But the fact remains that a strong pool of volunteer drivers is the first stone in the path toward more comprehensive transit options in rural areas.

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July 8-9, 2016
Public Welcome!

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Send submissions for the next *InTransit* to Laura: laura_eash@mpta-transit.org

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