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President's Column



The 2022 Minnesota Public Transit Conference was a huge success! Thank you to everyone who participated and made this one of our best conferences ever. We were able to re-connect in person and

learn from each other as we all work to improve transit service in Minnesota. Your voice is important so thank you for contributing to our work and for supporting MPTA!

If you would like to get a copy of the presentations from breakout sessions, you can find most of them on the MPTA web site: <https://www.mpta-transit.org/event/2022-minnesota-public-transit-conference>

I would also like to again congratulate all of our MPTA Transit Award Winners for 2022:

Distinguished Career:

Jack Larson, Arrowhead Transit

Transit Professional of the Year:

Kenneth Bakken, White Earth Transit

Transit System of the Year:

Otter Express

Management Innovation:

MNRTAP Entry-level Driver Training

Minnesota Bus Operator of the Year:

Terence Johnson, Otter Express

Duane Moore, Metro Transit

The 2022 election results are now clear and the DFL will control the governor's office, the Minnesota House and the Minnesota Senate. This is good news for transit systems which have traditionally received more support from Democrats. We also know that the state continues to have a major budget surplus in the general fund and that providing state matching dollars to access federal infrastructure funds is a top priority for both parties and is work that did not get done during the 2022 Session. MPTA is working now to develop our 2023 Legislative Agenda and reach out to key legislators regarding the importance of financial support for transit systems all across the state.

As we work to make our case for transit funding, we will be asking for your assistance in talking about the needs at your system. MPTA has been using transit system profiles in recent years to help explain to local legislators how transit service works in their districts. Once again, we will be asking transit systems to update their transit system profile so we can use these important documents as we communicate with legislators. The 2023 Legislature includes many new legislators who are not familiar with transit service or who is involved in providing transit service in their area. We really rely on your assistance with this effort!

2023 promises to be a year with a huge amount of opportunity for improving transit service in Minnesota. However, we will need to be active and vocal to make those opportunities a reality. MPTA is here to be a partner with you as we advocate for the resources transit systems need; whether it's funding for new technology, for operations, for staff or for vehicles, we are here to assist in meeting the needs of transit systems as we build back and prepare for a new future. Thank you for your partnership, your membership and your support.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ryan I Daniel". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Ryan Daniel, MPTA President
MPTA President

Legislative Report

It's official – the November, 2022 forecast has been released and the projection for the 2024-25 biennium is for a historic \$17.6 billion surplus. FY 2022-23 now expected to close \$5 billion higher than previously estimated.

Projected general fund balance in FY 2024-25 of \$17.6 billion includes \$12 billion leftover from previous biennium.

There was a lot of anticipation last year that the legislature would pass a supplemental budget including additional funding for transit systems as well as a major capital bonding bill. Unfortunately, disagreement at the end of the session and an inability to reach a deal for a special session meant that the historic budget surplus was left for future legislatures to deal with and the bonding bill was not even formally debated, let alone passed.

Now the state has a larger projected general fund surplus and the DFL has pulled off a trifecta – controlling the governor's office, House and Senate so the decisions about how to spend the money will be in their hands. We anticipate strong support for transit with the new Transportation Committee Chairs: Senator Scott Dibble and Rep. Frank Hornstein.

While there may be a major surplus projected in the general fund, transportation funds have not done as well. The difficulty in getting vehicles and parts has led to a reduction in revenue from the Motor Vehicle Sales Tax (MVST). We've also seen a reduction in the revenue from leased vehicles, some of which is deposited in the transit assistance account for Greater Minnesota transit.

Committee Chairs have been announced for the 2023 Legislature.

Senate:

Transportation - Senator Scott Dibble (Minneapolis)
Capital Investment - Senator Sandy Pappas (St. Paul)
Finance - Senator John Marty (Roseville)
Taxes - Senator Ann Rest (New Hope)

House:

Transportation - Rep. Frank Hornstein (Minneapolis)
Capital Investment - Rep. Fue Lee (Minneapolis)
Sustainable Infrastructure - Rep. Erin Koegel (Spring Lake Park)
Ways and Means - Rep. Liz Olson (Duluth)
Taxes - Rep. Aisha Gomez (Minneapolis)

Leadership:

Senate Majority Leader - Kari Dziedzic (Minneapolis)
Senate President - Bobby Joe Champion (Minneapolis)
Senate Minority Leader - Mark Johnson (East Grand Forks)

House Speaker - Melissa Hortman (Brooklyn Park)
House Majority Leader - Jamie Long (Minneapolis)
House Minority Leader - Lisa Demuth (Cold Spring)



Legislative Report

Last year, both the House and Senate were working on a supplemental transportation budget bill that included an additional \$7 million in general fund dollars for Greater Minnesota transit. In addition, there was support for funding Bus Rapid Transit lines in the metro area. MPTA will be working to develop a legislative agenda for 2023 that more fully meets the needs of transit systems that are now facing major cost increases for vehicles and for operations. MPTA is looking at a couple of new potential sources of dedicated funding. We also want to make sure that Minnesota is in a good position to compete for federal discretionary grants available under the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act (IIJA).

The capital bonding bill has been an important source of funding for transit facilities as well as new transitways and we expect to see a major bonding bill this year in light of the fact that a bonding bill has not been passed since 2021 and that bill was pretty modest.

Transportation Day at the Capitol will be held on March 1st in St. Paul. Please plan to attend and help us advocate for needed transit resources. This event provides a great opportunity to hear directly from legislative leaders as well as meeting with your local legislators to talk more specifically about needs in your area. We make it easy by setting up appointments for you.

At the federal level, we're waiting to see if Congress can agree on a budget for federal fiscal year 2023. The federal fiscal year actually began on October 1st but no agreement could be reached on a new budget so the federal government is operating under a continuing resolution that is set to expire on December 16th. The CR keeps funding levels at the 2022 level. If the new budget is delayed, it will delay the increase scheduled to take place under the IIJA, however that increase is pretty small. The IIJA was structure so that the major increase took place in 2022 with smaller increases over the next four years of the authorization.

Next year's Congress will be a divided one with Democrats in charge of the US Senate and, of course, the White House, but Republicans in control of the US House. We don't anticipate much change when it comes to transportation funding. The expectation is that the IIJA will continue to be implemented as passed but with more oversight from the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

Minnesota's Congressional delegation did not change with the 2022 elections. All members were re-elected to two-year terms in the House. Our two US Senators were not up for re-election.

MPTA will continue to work with Congressional members on legislation to provide a higher mileage reimbursement rate for volunteer drivers. Several bills were introduced during the last Congress on this issue and we will be working to get more support for the goal of eliminating the 14-cent per mile reimbursement rate and allowing volunteer drivers to be paid the business rate set annually by the IRS.



2022 MPTA Award Winners



Transit Professional of the Year: **Kenneth Bakken**, White Earth Transit

Minnesota Bus Operator of the Year: **Duane Moore**, Metro Transit; **Terence Johnson**, Otter Express

Transit System of the Year: **Otter Express**

Management Innovation: **MNRTAP Entry-level Driver Training**

Distinguished Career: **Jack Larson**, Arrowhead Transit



2022 Transit Conference



MPTA Board of Directors 2023

During the MPTA Annual Membership meeting held on October 24, 2022, members voted to approve a new slate of Board members for the MPTA Board of Directors.

Here are the Board members for 2023:

[Ryan Daniel](#), President, St. Cloud Metro Bus

[Luther Wynder](#), Vice- President, Minnesota Valley Transit Authority

[Daryn Toso](#), Secretary, Transit Alternatives

[Nick Lemmer](#), Treasurer, Rochester Public Transit

[Mike Klauda](#), Vendor Representative, North Central Bus Sales

[Tiffany Collins](#), Central Community Transit

[Rod Fournier](#), Duluth Transit Authority

[Matt Fyten](#), SouthWest Transit

[Alan Herrmann](#), SmartLink

[Nick Leske](#), United Community Action

[Ted Nelson](#), Prairie Five Rides

[Brandon Nurmi](#), Arrowhead Transit

MPTA Board members continue to meet with OTAT staff every month. Some of the issues discussed include:

- Funding/Contracts for transit systems
- MPTA Legislative agenda and issues
- Planning - Updates to 5-Year Plans
- Events/Training
- Communication with Transit Systems



Board members are interested in your thoughts and suggestions. **Please feel free to contact any of the MPTA Board members regarding issues or needs you may have.** MPTA is here to serve your and to provide a liaison with the Office of Transit and Active Transportation.

THANK YOU MPTA CONTRIBUTORS!



Rosco is a leading global supplier of vision safety solutions to the bus and truck marketplace with over 115 years of engineering and manufacturing experience. Since 1907, Rosco has been headquartered in New York City, keeping their products engineered, manufactured, and supported in the USA. Today, Rosco remains the largest manufacturer of bus mirrors in North America and continues to develop technological innovations for safer roads. Rosco's intelligent solutions include AI-powered cameras and recording, cutting edge collision avoidance systems, and cloud-based SaaS platforms that improve safety, fleet efficiency, and driver productivity. Rosco's staff has grown to over 275 employees in facilities totaling 175,000 square feet. Distinguished bus and truck manufacturers installing Rosco products on new vehicles include Freightliner / Thomas Built Buses, Blue Bird, Navistar/IC Bus, Forest River/Starcraft, Oshkosh, Morgan Olson, Utilimaster, and many others.



Passengers around the world are seeking modern transportation options they can feel good about as traffic congestion, costs and air quality continue to saddle today's growing cities. That is why New Flyer is engineering innovative mobility solutions through buses, technology, and infrastructure that serves our communities and makes our cities smarter, while safeguarding precious resources. In doing so, we are creating jobs, fortifying North America's infrastructure and modernizing the industry and the world around us.

New Flyer was founded in 1930 and is now the largest transit bus manufacturer in North America, with fabrication, manufacturing, and service centers in the United States and Canada. We continue building on our 90+ year legacy of innovation to deliver innovative mobility solutions and technology that meets the demands of communities today, and into the future.

New Flyer is a subsidiary of NFI Group Inc. (NFI), one of the world's largest bus and coach manufacturers. Today, New Flyer offers the most advanced, innovative product line under the Xcelsior® and Xcelsior CHARGE® brands, and also offers infrastructure development through NFI Infrastructure Solutions™, a service dedicated to providing innovative, safe, sustainable, and reliable charging and mobility solutions.

New express Route 784 serving east downtown Minneapolis



NEWS RELEASE

Maple Grove Transit (MGT) is excited to announce the start of the new express Route 784. This new route will serve the eastern part of downtown Minneapolis. Key destinations include Wells Fargo, Thrivent Financial, Hennepin County Medical Center, U.S. Bank Stadium, and the Mills District. The new service begins August 22. The new route originates at the Maple Grove Transit, and has six inbound and five outbound express trips.

Commuters have long requested service to this area of Minneapolis. The current express routes serving downtown Minneapolis required commuters to walk six to eight blocks to get to these destinations. Prior to the pandemic, ridership demand and operations logistics just did not allow MGT to expand to this area. However, with recent changes in mobility habits and patterns, MGT has the resources and flexibility to create a new route to serve the eastern part of downtown Minneapolis. The continued suspension of Routes 780, 782, and 783 has helped provide the financial and operational flexibility to start a new route.

To accomplish this service change, the current Route 781 trips were restructured in terms of trip times and total number of trips offered. However, the proposed Route 781 service plan matches well to the current demand. The proposal includes Route 785 and 789 trips, but the Route 780, 782, and 783 remain suspended.

Check out our website at www.maplegrovetransit.org for all our service details and to download a copy of the pocket schedule.



Rainbow Rider Completes Comprehensive Review

By Brenda Brittin

We all have those moments in life when something significant happens and we remember exactly where we were and what we were doing when it happened.

OTAT's announcement of the Comprehensive Review Program and Rainbow Rider being selected as one of the first participants is one of those moments for me. I was working at home that day and remember well the overwhelming amount of text messages, emails and phone conversations that began as a result of the announcement that day. The transit world lit up with a multitude of concerns.



I have been a part of Rainbow Rider since 1998 and because of some of the things I have experienced over the past 24 years (things I would have never imagined could happen), the Comprehensive Review didn't bring much concern to me. Anyone who knows me, also knows that I inherited the Director's position in 2018 – it wasn't something that I signed up for. The Comprehensive Review seemed like an opportunity for someone in my position and I decided to proceed onward with a positive attitude.

Rainbow Rider received official notification of the Comprehensive Review by a letter emailed to us approximately one-month prior (the date set via email coordination between all involved parties). This initial letter gave us an overview of the purpose of the review, the stages in which it would be conducted as well as personnel recommended for participation. Soon after, we received an email with a Minnesota Comprehensive Review Program Field Guide as well as a Program Description and Upload Instructions for any items that may not have been already been provided by MnDOT (I believe in Rainbow Rider's case, I was only required to upload 4 additional items).

The email explained that the Program Guide is what would be used by the review team but it was also very clear that we were only responsible for any questions not previously answered on behalf of MnDOT. The Program Guide was put together quite well and was separated into 13 sections. I scheduled meetings with appropriate staff per section to review any unanswered questions and found that alone to be a good internal review and already anticipated what some of the recommended changes might be going into the Comprehensive Review.

The Comprehensive Review took place on November 16 and 17 at Rainbow Rider's administrative office in Lowry, MN. It was very conversational in nature – Rainbow Rider telling our story. In the end, there were no surprises...if something didn't seem right to the consultants, the matter was discussed further and a solution or recommendation was made prior to moving onto the next section. The consultants also celebrated with Rainbow Rider staff when they found the many things we were doing well.

In my opinion, after being with Rainbow Rider as long as I have, you can develop tunnel vision. Going through our procedures helped me as well as other staff see things that we needed to change or perhaps could do better.

Rainbow Rider hasn't received its final report yet but we have begun working on some of the items that came to light and the consultants have been extremely helpful when asked for assistance.

In closing, everyone at Rainbow Rider that participated in the Comprehensive Review left feeling it was a positive experience. We all hope that the other systems walk away feeling the same way from their experience.

All aboard Hermann Express — new bus operation will transport people across city on an hourly schedule

New Ulm Journal – Oct 5, 2022

NEW ULM — The Hermann Express bus route opens to passengers first Wednesday, following a special ribbon-cutting event Tuesday.

The Hermann Express will travel a fixed-route through New Ulm on an hourly schedule. There are 18 stops on the bus route. The bus will serve each stop once an hour.

The bus will operate from 8 a.m.-noon and 1-4 p.m. Monday through Friday. To get riders accustomed to using the bus, there will be no cost to ride the bus during 2022. Service will be free until January 2023, when the fare will be \$1.

Hermann Express will be an extension of the Heartland Express service that has operated in Brown County since 1993.

Pat LaCourse, transit manager for Heartland Express, said the on-demand, dial-a-ride, bus service offered by Heartland Express will continue to operate in addition to the Hermann Express.

LaCourse said the creation of a fixed-bus route in New Ulm has been discussed for 20 years and it was finally made possible through partnerships with the Minnesota Department of Transportation and the city.

Before the ribbon cutting, Mayor Terry Sveine gave a brief history of bus transportation in New Ulm. The Hermann Express is not the first fixed-route bus to operate in the city.

The New Ulm Bus Line began in 1946 with the same concept of providing transportation assistance to those who need it to include stops at various employers, shopping venues and public service stops. The bus line would change hands over the years but remained in operation until 1961.

Sveine said the key element of operating the bus service was having a critical mass of riders. The rise of individual car ownership meant public transportation was needed less after World War II. The previous bus lines had no public funding to rely on, and Sveine believed this would make the difference between the old bus line and the new Hermann Express.

Sveine believed the bus system was a benefit of urban living and more environmentally efficient. Like the previous bus lines, the Hermann Express would be an efficient method for commuters traveling to and from work.

New Ulm City Manager Chris Dalton said when he first began working for the city, a bus route was the most requested service from residents.

The opening of the bus route was only the first step. In the future, the city plans to add additional electric buses to the fixed route.



Heartland Express assistant manager Nate Moldan said the electric buses have been ordered, but due to delivery and transport backlogs, they will be unavailable until 2025. The two electric buses would operate at the same time, cutting the wait to half an hour. Electric buses are capable of operating all day on a single charge.

For now, Hermann Express has a single bus with 17 fixed seats and space for two wheelchairs.

Updates from the Office of Transit and Active Transportation

Hello Transit Friends and Partners!

We continue to see changes in our work and in our industry on what seems to be a daily basis. The latest big news in the Office of Transit and Active Transportation is the departure of Interim Assistant Office Director Amber Dallman, who has accepted a position as the Director of MnDOT's Office of Sustainability and Public Health. She will be joining their office full time on November 23rd. We wish Amber all the best, recognizing that she will be missed in OTAT.

In other OTAT staffing news, we're excited to introduce ... or re-introduce to many of you ... Fay Simer! Fay has worked with us before (back in the early 20-teens) and will be supervising the IDEA Unit while Kirby Becker is on his mobility assignment with MnDOT's Office of Aeronautics. We are delighted for the opportunity to work with Fay again and we know you will all help her feel welcome.

The multitude of changes in the world of transit and in our office staff over the past few years has prompted us to look at ways to be more responsive and better organized. OTAT has implemented several activities to help us move the needle toward better communication with our external partners including the listening sessions that OTAT leadership held with our transit partners across the state this fall and the convening of an OTAT Partners Communications Team.

The OTAT Partners Communications Team formed this past spring and includes volunteers from across the state who are working together to improve communications in and around public transportation in Minnesota. This group has been hard at work identifying challenges, obstacles, priorities and new ideas. For your reference, this article, the biweekly (or less frequently when there is no news to report) OTAT staff update emails, and the RTAP Peer Roundtables are just a few examples of the ideas we've implemented so far and there are many more in the works. In the relatively near future, you can expect to see improvements to the OTAT website, and better organization and scheduling on requests from OTAT.

Please thank our tireless volunteers in this process: Alex Stoiaken, Anthony Landgren, Cindy Pic, Dave Green, Jeremy Monahan, Kirby Becker, Margaret Donahoe, Paul Coyour, Ryan Nelson, Shelly Pflaum, Torey Hunkus, and me (Melinda Estey).

One of the great opportunities of projects like this – in addition to creating momentum on valuable projects – is getting to know more people in our transit community better! If you have ideas for us to consider or want to join in on the fun, send me an email and we'll add you to the group. Meetings are currently held virtually on the last Wednesday of each month from 9 to 10am.

And once again ... recognizing that I do sound like a broken record: The work you all do makes an incredible difference in the lives of the people we serve, and we – at the Office of Transit and Active Transportation – are dedicated to helping you to do this as efficiently and effectively as possible. Thank You for all that you do and for helping us to help you to continue doing it.

Do you have questions about how things work at MnDOT, what our thoughts are for current or future projects, or anything else? Let me know what you're interested in learning about and we can tackle those in future editions of In Transit! melinda.estey@state.mn.us

Planning For Change in Transit

By Melinda Estey and Glenn Gadbois



How many times have you gotten frustrated by delayed delivery of vehicles, the inability to hire drivers or to find time in the day to get it all done? Maybe you've tried finding solutions. Maybe you've just thrown up your hands, resolving that there isn't enough time in the day and returned to the fires you can put out.

We know that transit is a public utility with health, social, and economic benefits for Greater Minnesota; but we also know that we haven't always prioritized planning for continuity, facing unexpected challenges, or ongoing improvements. COVID revealed many fault lines and our ability to quickly pivot to respond to changing challenges or demands was one of them. We weren't ready for the difficulties arising from COVID, e.g., Supply chain problems (vehicle delivery), radical shifts in workforce (drivers), inflation (vehicle/fuel costs), and fluctuations in funding (federal funding injections, then MSVT declines).

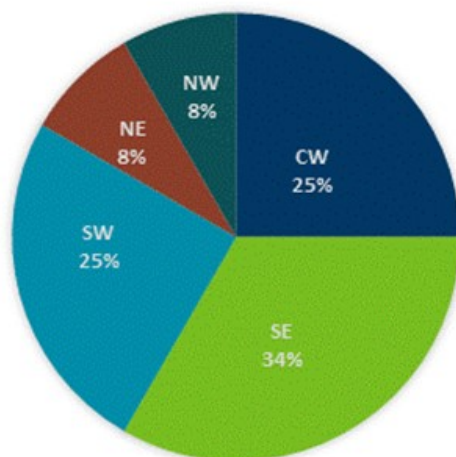
We propose that now is the time to better prepare ourselves for future unknowns and our ability to respond to them.

Benefits: What's in it for you

Since we all know that failure to plan is planning to fail, MnDOT's Office of Transit and Active Transportation is offering consulting services to anyone needing help with this effort.

Starting as early as January 2023, consultants will schedule work requested by transit systems.

REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF RESPONDENTS



Consultant planning service can be used in almost any area that a transit system needs help, from service design to marketing to procurement, etc... If it is a component of your operations, we can likely offer help.

Improved planning can help you to better define success for your organization, identify needs and barriers, plan for how to meet those needs and/or remove or overcome those barriers, and to be better prepared for future unknowns.

Improved planning results in improved performance ... better positioning all of us to meet the needs of our communities.

MnDOT is dedicated to providing resources to help you – our essential service partners – to be successful.

Planning For Change in Transit

By Melinda Estey and Glenn Gadbois

Essential information to know

Requests for planning support may be submitted via the Survey Monkey link below, reaching out to your TPM, or reaching out to Glenn Gadbois directly.

Already, 12 Transit System Managers have asked for assistance with 26 priorities and 116 tasks overall.

Scheduling will begin in December and January, with actual services beginning shortly thereafter.

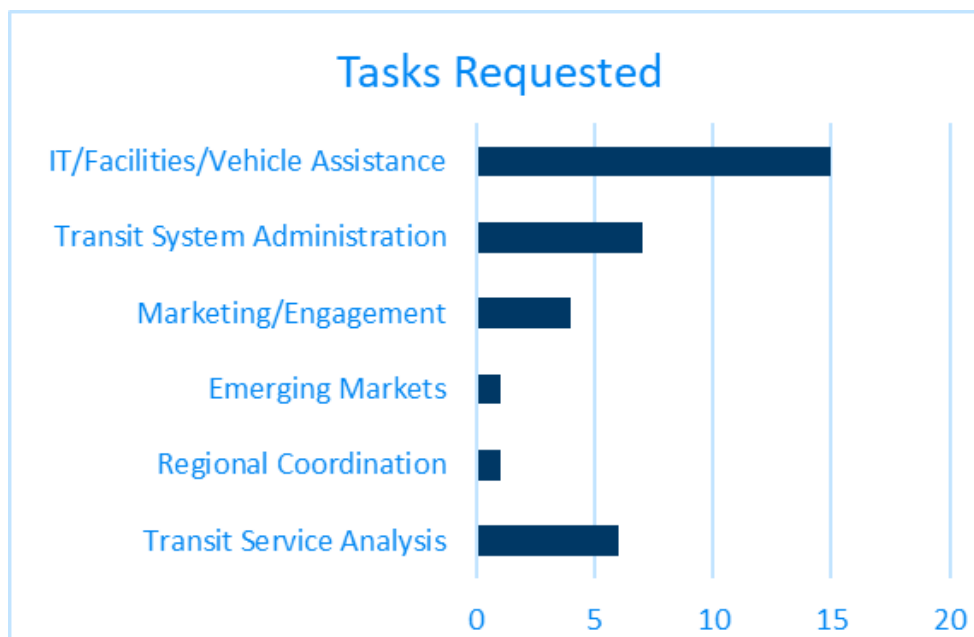
MnDOT proposes a “We will Learn Together” approach to prioritizing tasks and keeping it as uncomplicated as possible for as long as possible. This will be discussed in greater detail with Transit Managers at the December TAC meeting.

If you are interested in submitting a request for assistance, you have three options:

Go to <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/3GWN8RP>

Reach out to your TPM.

Reach out directly to Glenn.Gadbois@state.MN.US



Minnesota Bikeways Map

MnDOT's new web-based Minnesota Bikeways map shows nearly all known bikeways in Minnesota. This online version complements the printed map that MnDOT publishes every two years.

Google and Apple Maps might show what road to take and how long it may take to get there, but they don't provide other helpful bicycling information like annual average daily traffic numbers, how wide the path or road shoulder is, and riding surface type.



This mapping product was greatly improved by the development of the Bikeways Data Standards in partnership with the Minnesota Geospatial Advisory Council, which allows information to be displayed more consistently, makes updating it easier, and enhances user experience and confidence in the data.

The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources and local partners (cities, counties, and regional governments) currently provide most of the route and attribute information. However, anyone can submit bikeway edits using the online [MN Bicycle Facilities Crowdsourcing Application](#).

Phase Two plans for the project include developing Avenza maps for bikeways in each Minnesota county. Users will be able to download these maps on their iOS and Android mobile devices and navigate without the Internet or network connections.

Whether you're filling in network gaps in your community, planning a safe route to school, pedaling to get a sandwich or across the entire state, MnDOT hopes people use this map to make awesome bicycling memories.

This project isn't an app, in the traditional sense. Instead of downloading something to a phone, a user can access the Bikeways map through their mobile browser.

Check it out at mndot.gov/bike/state-bike-map.html

Good Question: Why is service being reduced in December in Twin Cities?

Posted by Drew Kerr |



In November, more than 90 people attended hiring events to apply and interview for bus operator positions – the most activity we’ve seen at events like these in more than two years.

This is a hopeful sign that interest in becoming a bus operator is on the rise. But, today, we are about 300 bus operators short of where we need to be to offer about the same amount of service we did before the pandemic began.

To maintain reliable service as hiring efforts continue, service on many routes is being reduced on Saturday, Dec. 3. A summary of these changes is available [here](#).

How many operators do you have, and how many do you need?

- As of November 2022, we are about 70 full-time bus operators short of where we need to be to reliably support existing service levels. The budget allows for 1,400 full- and part-time bus operators and there are around 1,100 today. (Part-time operators work morning and afternoon shifts on weekdays, or on weekends; job seekers are invited to apply for part-time operator roles, however full-time operators are the greatest need.)
- There are several reasons we have fewer operators, including historically low unemployment, retirements, internal promotions, and a temporary pause in operator hiring at the beginning of the pandemic.

What are you doing to recruit new operators?

- Starting pay for new bus operators was recently increased to \$26.16. The hiring bonus for new operators with Commercial Drivers Licenses (CDLs) is \$5,000; a \$3,000 bonus is provided to successful applicants who need to earn a CDL permit while training with us.
- We are hosting monthly operator hiring events where job seekers can apply and interview in one visit. Applicants who pass the interview will receive a conditional offer on the same day. The next How will the December service changes help?
- Combined, the December service changes will reduce service by about 8% and the full-time operator requirement by 80 operators. Service is being reduced more than the current operator deficit because many employees retire at the beginning of the year.
- Reducing the number of operators needed to provide service means there is less chance trips will be unexpectedly cancelled when operators cannot come to work due to illness or other reasons (extra operators are on standby to fill in as needed). This also provides resiliency in the system when winter weather events impact roads and our ability to stay on schedule.
- In October, about 1% of scheduled trips (1,547 out of 169,443 trips) were cancelled. By comparison, reliability has suffered elsewhere when service has not been adjusted to match the workforce.
- The METRO D Line’s opening on December 3 will bring more reliable service to the corridor now served by Route 5, our busiest bus route. Largely replacing local bus service with BRT service benefits customers and operators with a minimal impact on operator requirements.

We are hopeful that increased interest will mean we can begin adding some service back in 2023.

Grand Forks-East Grand Forks Metropolitan Planning Organization looking at implementing microtransit service

By Meghan Arbegast Source Grand Forks Herald (TNS)

Oct. 22—GRAND FORKS — Service improvements — including the potential implementation of microtransit in the Cities Area Transit system — are some of the refinements listed in the drafted final 10-year transit development plan in progress at the Grand Forks-East Grand Forks Metropolitan Planning Organization.

Microtransit is described as on-demand shared transportation that would pick-up and drop-off riders at specific locations within a defined zone. Users would be able to request a ride by app, online or over the phone.

As other entities have successfully implemented microtransit, MPO senior planner Teri Kouba said the MPO and CAT are looking to do so as well.

"There are a lot of different reasons why different entities implement microtransit," Kouba said. "It's a way of managing your equipment as well as your people and your time."

Microtransit in Grand Forks and East Grand Forks would run on current fixed bus routes that generally don't have a lot of riders. Kouba said some of those routes include ones that are north of UND and on the southern side of East Grand Forks. While those routes do have lower ridership, Kouba said CAT and the MPO still want to continue providing services to those parts of town.

"It's definitely making sure that we can continue services in areas where you might not necessarily have the largest ridership in that area, but they're definitely an area that people are looking to continue to have that service available to them," Kouba said.

With microtransit, Kouba said there will be a cost benefit with CAT not having fixed bus routes for the identified areas that have lower ridership.

"It's hard to continually have a route that runs that much time, that much distance and not have ridership to show that this is worth the cost," Kouba said. "Doing that cost benefit analysis ... microtransit will raise that benefit in relation to cost."

Microtransit will also reach parts of each city that currently aren't covered by the fixed bus routes for people commuting to and from work. Some of those locations are on the northern end of Grand Forks, where there is a lot of industry.

"We have a lot of manufacturing jobs and a lot of other jobs in those areas, too," Kouba said. "We're also looking at if microtransit or a specific fixed route would be more appropriate for, say, the industrial park. I know that there are a lot of jobs there and that people are having a hard time accessing them from where they live."

Other potential areas where a fixed route could be replaced by the on-demand microtransit service is the UND night route and the entire city of East Grand Forks.

A Volunteer Driver Drought Is Threatening Vulnerable Adults' Access to Care in Rural Communities

US News and World Report By Christina Saint Louis, KHN

Several times a month, Jim Maybach drives 5 miles from his house in Hay Creek, Minnesota, toward the Mississippi River.

When he reaches Red Wing, a city of nearly 17,000 people, the 79-year-old retired engineer stops to pick up a senior whom he then delivers to an appointment, such as a dentist visit or an exercise class. When the appointment ends, Maybach is there to drive the person home.

Jim and Judie Maybach are volunteer drivers for Faith in Action in Red Wing, providing community members in Red Wing, Minnesota, with free transportation to and from appointments and other essential services. (LIAM JAMES DOYLE FOR KHN)

It's a route and routine he repeats a handful of times each month.

Maybach is unpaid, a volunteer among a cadre organized by Faith in Action in Red Wing, a non-profit that relies on retirees to ferry residents to essential services.

The riders, mostly seniors, are people who don't have immediate access to transportation, especially in rural areas where public transit options are either limited or nonexistent.

There are several such programs serving rural counties in Minnesota, but, as with other services across the country, their existence has become precarious because the number of volunteer drivers has steadily declined, according to transportation advocates. Volunteers either get to a point where, because of age, they can no longer drive, or the costs associated with their volunteerism are no longer sustainable. For decades, Congress has refused to increase the rate at which the drivers' expenses can be reimbursed.

Experts say that with public transit in rural areas already insufficient and the long distances that residents in rural communities must travel to access health care, a decimated volunteer driver network would leave seniors with even fewer transportation options and could interrupt their health management. Already, social service organizations that rely on volunteers have begun to restrict their service options and deny ride requests when drivers aren't available.

Recognizing the need for drivers in their community is often what got volunteers to sign up in the first place, but as car insurance and gas costs increase, the commitment is not "the attractive win-win that it once was," said Frank Douma, director of state and local policy and outreach for the Institute for Urban and Regional Infrastructure Finance at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School of Public Affairs.

Volunteers, like Maybach, are eligible for a reimbursement of 14 cents per mile, which generally doesn't come close to covering the cost of gas and wear and tear on a vehicle. And while the Internal Revenue Service increased the business rate from 58.5 cents per mile to 62.5 cents per mile in June, it did not raise the charitable rate because it is under Congress' purview and must be set by statute. The charitable rate was last changed in 1997.



A Volunteer Driver Drought Is Threatening Vulnerable Adults' Access to Care in Rural Communities

US News and World Report By Christina Saint Louis, KHN

Despite the long-standing charitable rate, United Community Action Partnership, a nonprofit that runs a volunteer driving program in southwestern Minnesota, had for years been reimbursing drivers using the business rate. The program's administrators didn't realize the IRS could count volunteers' reimbursements that exceed the charitable rate as income.

The organization experienced its "first major drop" in the number of volunteer drivers before the covid-19 pandemic, after it found out about the IRS rule and told volunteers about the tax implications of higher reimbursement rates, said Shelly Pflaum, the driving program's administrator.

And although the nonprofit continued to reimburse at the business rate, the remaining drivers were frustrated that as gas prices spiked in the spring, the rate remained only 58.5 cents per mile, which did not cover the cost of gas or maintenance.

"When you're paying nearly five dollars for gas, it is no longer helping," Pflaum said. "So, there were some concerns: 'With what I'm spending to drive my vehicle, this is no longer reasonable for me — I can't afford to volunteer' essentially is what it was coming down to."

The IRS business rate bump in June was enough to convince most drivers to stay, but Pflaum said she lost a volunteer who had been driving for nearly 20 years.

The issue of unequal rates has gained bipartisan attention in Congress, with the introduction of two bills — both sponsored by Minnesota representatives who propose increasing the charitable mileage reimbursement rate to the business rate. Similar proposals have been made in Congress before and failed.

Last year, Minnesota passed legislation that distinguished volunteer drivers from drivers-for-hire. Legislators also reduced the drivers' potential in-state tax liability.

In southeastern Minnesota, the driver shortage prompted a program at the nonprofit Semcac to cut back on the types of rides it offers. It limits users to two nonmedical trips per month.

"We would allow more if we had the drivers to do those, but we don't want to take the drivers on nonmedical rides and then somebody doesn't get to their doctor appointment," said Jessica Schwering, operations manager at Semcac. "There's way more of a need than what we can provide for, and it's only getting worse."

If Semcac cannot arrange a driver for a community member in need of a ride, the person must look for an alternative, such as a ride from a family member, or have their health insurance provider find one. Semcac has partnered with certain insurance providers to get their clients to medical and dental appointments. Not all volunteer driver programs have this structure.

Using Tech To Make Transit Accessible For Those Without Smartphones

Next City HENRY PAN OCTOBER 25, 2022

When Paul Mielke gets to the Metro Transit bus stop at the northwest corner of Franklin and Nicollet, a busy intersection surrounded by brick apartment buildings new and old, about half a mile south of downtown Minneapolis, the first thing he looks at is a big yellow sign.

The sign, which is essentially a dual-screen Amazon Kindle mounted on a street pole, is powered by solar energy and feeds real-time schedule information pulled through a cellular modem. It's one of several initiatives that transit agencies across the nation are working on to help people navigate transit without a smartphone.

"I don't have to grab my smartphone and look stuff up," said Mielke. "I wish there were more of them."



Smartphones have revolutionized how we communicate and plan our trips, and how much transit agencies have to invest in providing transit information. But according to a 2021 Pew Research Center study, about 15% of Americans don't have one. The study also found that Americans who are making less than \$30,000 a year, are 65 and older, or have an education level of high school or less are much less likely to have one. And for those who do have smartphones, it might not necessarily be able to stay on all day without a recharge.

Making real-time transit information accessible in more places, however, is an expensive and sometimes intrusive endeavor that often requires coordination with other agencies to access existing buried utilities. So agencies in the Twin Cities, Boston, New York City and beyond are experimenting with technology such as e-paper as a way to get around it. The e-paper signs, which Metro Transit first deployed in 2021 are different — and cheaper to procure — than the full-color displays that they have installed at their rapid bus stops, as well as on stops on Nicollet Mall. The full-color displays, which cost just under \$10,000 for the computer and monitor alone, rely on fiber and hardwired electrical connections, as well as an onboard computer and air conditioning, to work.

Riders say the e-paper signs, which cost between \$3,500 to \$5,000 each, are easier to read because they are high-contrast and don't produce glare. The solar-powered signs also cycle through maps of different routes that serve the stop every 30 seconds, something the full-colored signs don't do.

With federal funding, they were able to purchase five of them, along with solar panels to power them. They allocated the signs based on how busy the stops were and whether those stops will be upgraded for the region's growing rapid bus network in the next two years.

"We obviously want to put these things where people are going to see them and use them," says Metro Transit Manager of Transit Information Jacob Brown.

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Four are installed in Minneapolis, two near the University of Minnesota's eastern part of campus, and two along Franklin Avenue just south of Downtown Minneapolis. A fifth sign is installed at a rapid bus stop in St. Paul to replace a real-time information pylon that was destroyed in a car crash so the agency can evaluate whether or not they could serve as interim replacements should it happen again.

They also factored in how much sun a potential site gets in installing the signs, as each sign needs to be charged by direct sunlight two hours a day to work. Brown adds it's unlikely these signs will work in downtown Minneapolis or downtown St. Paul, because the tall buildings block out the sun.

The busiest stop that has an e-paper sign, Nicollet and Franklin, with 600 average weekday boardings as of last fall, is also the most challenging site because the existing pole is enveloped by building shadow on Winter Solstice. Nonetheless, Brown says the sign still worked. In a car crash so the agency can evaluate whether or not they could serve as interim replacements should it happen again.

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In addition to e-paper signs, in 2018 Metro Transit installed screens on 11 of their buses that mostly operate on the A Line rapid bus route in St. Paul. The screens show the next several stops coming up, along with real-time arrival predictions for connecting routes, so riders can spend more time anticipating the best transfer rather than worrying about missing their stop.

"One thing that wasn't really provided in the past is if you're on the bus, and you don't have [a] cell phone, you'll have that [information] with you," says Metro Transit Manager of Technology Systems Gary Nyberg.

It's also useful for riders who are hard-of-hearing, like frequent A Line rider Nickolas Hentges, who runs a card trading business in St. Paul. "It does show a very good comprehensive map," says Hentges. "Without those signs, I have to intently listen to the person's voice over the intercom to tell me where we're at."



Buy America Waivers

FTA Buy America Waiver for Vans and Minivans

On October 25, 2022, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) issued a partial, temporary waiver from some Buy America requirements pertaining to FTA grant recipients' purchases of mass production vans and minivans for use in public transportation. This waiver applies only to vans and minivans (and, as FTA hypothetically notes, large sport-utility vehicles) designed to seat at least six persons, including the driver; the waiver does NOT apply to vehicles that are modified to incorporate accessibility features nor any other sort of after-market conversion.

This is not a blanket waiver for all van or minivan purchases by FTA grant recipients. Vans and minivans purchased under this waiver must have US-manufactured engines or motors, and must have their final assembly in the US.

This waiver is temporary, and will expire on October 24, 2024. It's important to note, though, that FTA may rescind the waiver before that date if it determines that Buy America-compliant mass production vans and minivans are available for purchase by its grant recipients.

FTA has issued this waiver in response to requests by some of its grantees that they be able to acquire vehicles for use in vanpool services, and FTA expects that most, perhaps all, vehicles acquired under this waiver will be used for FTA-supported vanpools.

To read the full language of this waiver notice, and related FTA documentation, visit the FTA "Buy America" page on their website: <https://www.transit.dot.gov/buyamerica>

FTA Waiver of 4-Year Useful Life Extension for Small Transit Vehicle Rebuilds

Normally, FTA's policy is that its dollars can be used for rebuilding existing transit vehicles only if the rebuild will significantly extend the useful life of that vehicle. But as many transit managers and state DOTs are all too painfully aware, there is a critical shortfall in the ability of transit vehicle manufacturers to supply cutaway-style vehicles built on van chassis.

In response to that vehicle supply crisis, FTA issued a "Dear Colleague" letter on November 2, 2022, in which they announced a temporary waiver of the requirement that FTA-funded rebuilt cutaways or other medium-size, light-duty transit buses have their useful life extended by at least four years. Under this waiver, which will remain in effect until November 1, 2024, FTA-funded rebuilds of these smaller transit vehicles need only extend the vehicle's useful life by two years.

To read the entirety of that Dear Colleague letter, visit the FTA website at <https://www.transit.dot.gov/sites/fta.dot.gov/files/2022-11/Dear-Colleague-Letter-Cutaway-Rebuild-Useful-Life-Waiver.pdf>.



**Federal Transit
Administration**

Upcoming Events:

2023

Transportation
Day at the Capitol
March 1st

Capitol Ridge Hotel
St. Paul



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