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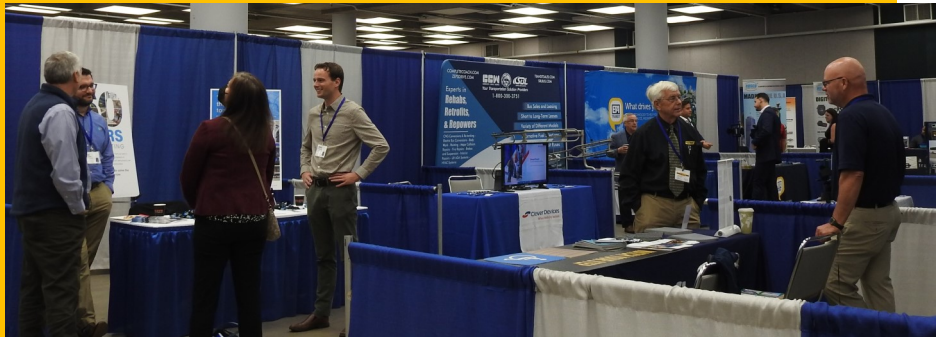
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President's Column



Congratulations to all of our 2023 MPTA Bus Rodeo winners!

Everyone who competed worked hard, learned a lot and had fun.

We want to give a huge shout out to all of the

Rodeo committee members who worked so hard to plan this event and all of the volunteers who were there to make this event happen! Our host, Rochester Transit, made us all feel welcome. We also want to thank Sarah Ghandour, the new Director of the Office of Transit and Active Transportation (OTAT) for joining us and helping out with the event!

It may be summer, but MPTA continues to work on your behalf, speaking out for transit needs and the services we provide to riders all across the state. After a very successful 2023 Legislative Session in St. Paul, MPTA members are heading to Washington, D.C. for the Transportation Alliance Fly-In. Members will be meeting with the Congressional delegation and staff to talk about critical issues including federal legislation that would increase the mileage reimbursement for volunteer drivers.

MPTA board members are continuing to meet regularly with staff at OTAT to discuss important issues and funding challenges. We appreciate the opportunity to work more closely with OTAT as we all work to provide the best transit service possible. If you have specific issues you would like addressed, please let me know.

Our big event is coming up October 23-25 – the MN/WI Public Transit Conference in La Crosse. This year's conference will be bigger and better than ever with important updates, training, sessions on hot topics and lots of opportunities to network with your colleagues and friends. Registration is easy, just sign up on our MPTA web site. If your transit agency is funded through FTA Section 5310 or 5311 or you are a Tribal Transit provider, you are eligible to apply for an RTAP scholarship to attend the Minnesota/Wisconsin public transit conference.

An important part of the annual transit conference is the MPTA Annual Membership Meeting. This is our opportunity to talk about how the association is doing and what we can do to support our members in the coming year. Please plan to attend the Annual Meeting on October 23rd and join the conversation.

We also present MPTA advocate awards at the Annual Meeting. You can nominate a colleague who deserves recognition for their hard work. Just complete this quick online form: [Submit Your Nominations Today!](#)

We are here to serve you so don't hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns. Thank you for your partnership and your continued advocacy!

Sincerely,

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

Legislative Report

MPTA continues to assess the impact of the 2023 Legislative Session while we prepare for the 2024 Session.

With a huge increase in funding for transit in the Metropolitan Area and a significant, ongoing increase for Greater Minnesota transit, we expect to see a stronger investment in new transit service as well as a reduction in the operating budget shortfalls.

The 2024 session will be focused on a major capital bonding bill. State agencies and local governments have submitted their preliminary requests. We will wait to see how much of the funding requests make it into Governor Walz's capital budget recommendations.



MnDOT	Priority	Revenue	2024	2026	2028
Multimodal Transportation	1	GF	\$ 200,000	\$ 200,000	\$ 0
High Priority Bridges	2	THB	\$ 100,000	\$ 100,000	\$ 100,000
ARMER Radio Communication Tower and Building Replacement	3	GO	\$ 11,000	\$ 0	\$ 0
Drainage Asset Management Projects	4	GF	\$ 2,000	\$ 2,000	\$ 2,000
Highway Railroad Grade Crossing-Warning Devices Installation & Replacement	5	GO	\$ 10,000	\$ 10,000	\$ 10,000
Local Bridge Replacement Program	6	GO	\$ 160,000	\$ 160,000	\$ 160,000
Local Road Improvement Program	7	GO	\$ 130,000	\$ 130,000	\$ 130,000
		GF	\$ 20,000	\$ 20,000	\$ 20,000
ABRT Corridor Improvement Program	8	GO	\$ 50,000	\$ 50,000	\$ 50,000
Weigh Station	9	GO	\$ 20,000	\$ 0	\$ 0
Truck Parking Safety Improvements	10	GO	\$ 7,250	\$ 0	\$ 0
Port Development Assistance Program	11	GO	\$ 42,000	\$ 42,000	\$ 42,000
Minnesota Rail Service Improvement Program	12	GO	\$ 10,000	\$ 10,000	\$ 10,000
Minnesota Rural Airport Program	13	GO	\$ 10,000	\$ 10,000	\$ 10,000
Facilities Capital Improvement Program	1	THB	\$ 107,800	\$ 0	\$ 0
	4	THC	\$ 25,220	\$ 0	\$ 0
Greater Minnesota Transit	15	GO	\$ 10,000	\$ 10,000	\$ 10,000
Safe Routes to School Infrastructure Program (SRTS)	16	GO	\$ 1,000	\$ 1,000	\$ 1,000
Active Transportation	17	GO	\$ 1,000	\$ 1,000	\$ 1,000
Total Project Requests			\$ 917,270	\$ 746,000	\$ 546,000

General Obligation Bonds (GO) Total	\$462,250	\$424,000	\$424,000
General Fund Cash (GF) Total	\$222,000	\$222,000	\$22,000
Trunk Highway Bonds (THB) Total	\$207,800	\$100,000	\$100,000
Trunk Highway Cash (THC) Total	\$25,220	\$0	\$0

Legislative Report

The Metropolitan Council has requested \$75 million in GO bond funds for Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) projects. Multiple busway lines have been identified for implementation by 2030, and requested funding would advance the development of the F Line, G Line, and H Line corridors.

MPTA will be advocating for a significant level of funding for transit in the 2024 Capital Bonding bill.

We want to hear from you – Do you have capital facility needs? Are you thinking about a new facility for the future? You may be in the early stages of planning but, let us know about your needs so we can work for you to push for more state funding to meet these important needs.

The legislation passed during the 2023 Session also includes some important policy changes. **One section of the law changes the local match requirement for Greater Minnesota transit systems for the next two years.** The local share requirement for operating budgets will be 5%, while the local match for capital funding will be 10% for two years only. Additional funding was provided in general fund cash to cover the cost of this reduction.

Another policy provision created a Metropolitan Governance Task Force to study and make recommendations to the legislature on reform and governance of the Metropolitan Council. The study must include an analysis of the costs and benefits of:

- (1) direct election of members;
- (2) a combination of directly elected and appointed members;
- (3) a council of governments;
- (4) reapportioning responsibilities of the council to state agencies and local units of government; and
- (5) adoption of a home rule charter for governance of the Metropolitan Council

At the federal level, Congress is taking its annual August break. While committees in both the House and Senate have passed versions of the FY2024 Transportation and Housing and Urban Development (THUD) Appropriations bill, there are significant differences in the dollar amounts between the House and Senate. The federal fiscal year ends at the end of September so we expect to see a Continuing Resolution (CR) passed to keep the government operating sometime in September to allow more time for the two bodies to come to an agreement on spending levels.

MPTA continues to work with members of Congress to advance legislation that would change the reimbursement rate for mileage costs associated with volunteer drivers. We're making progress in building political support for this change.

MPTA members will be traveling to Washington, D.C. September 19-21st to meet directly with members of Congress and their staff. The annual Fly-In provides a great opportunity to raise awareness of transit services and funding needs.

As always, please provide any suggestions for legislation to [Sherry Munyon](#).



Congratulations to the Winners!

Rochester Bus Rodeo July 21-22, 2023



Small Bus Competition Winners:

1st Place: **David Peacock**, St. Cloud Metro Bus

2nd Place: **Keith Drake**, St. Cloud Metro Bus

3rd Place: **Leroy Rentz**, Wadena Friendly Rider



Large Bus Competition Winners:

1st Place: **Chris Daniels**, Rochester Transit

2nd Place: **Julie Dockendorf**, St. Cloud Metro Bus

3rd Place: **Jonathan Dumenya**, Metro Transit

Rochester Bus Rodeo July 21-22, 2023



2023 Minnesota/Wisconsin Public Transportation Conference

October 23-25, 2023

LaCrosse Convention Center

Register Today!

Your organization will be recognized with signs and announcements at all of these events throughout the conference:

- Monday Welcome Reception
- Tuesday Breakfast
- Tuesday Expo Luncheon
- Wednesday Breakfast
- Wednesday Closing Luncheon

Contribution Levels



PLATINUM LEVEL

\$7,000

- Includes four representatives
- Special recognition at Plenary Sessions throughout the conference
- Prominent logo and company description in program
- Recognition in conference packet
- Prominent display on signs
- Prime booth location in the expo hall

GOLD LEVEL

\$2,000

- Includes three representatives
- Special recognition at Annual Meetings and Welcome Reception
- Prominent logo and company description in program
- Recognition in conference packet
- Prominent display on signage at Events and Registration Area
- Prime booth location in booth and multiple attendee registrations included

SILVER LEVEL

\$1,500

- Includes two representatives
- Prominent display in conference packet
- Company displayed on all signage at events
- Company recognized in conference program
- Better booth location and multiple attendee registrations included

BRONZE LEVEL

\$600

- Includes one representative
- Company recognized on all signage at events
- Company listed in conference program
- Company recognized in conference packet

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2023 Minnesota/Wisconsin Public Transportation Conference

***Sponsorship and Expo Opportunities —
Get Great Exposure for your Company!***



Vendor Registration Rates

- \$600 Regional / National Vendor or vendor with vehicles
 - \$350 per vehicle (35 feet or larger)
 - \$200 per vehicle (under 35 feet)
 - \$400 Statewide (MN) Vendor

Vendors With Vehicles are Provided an 8-foot table and two chairs

Other Vendors Receive a Standard Booth Size 10' x 8' with 8-foot table

Expo Fees Include All Costs for Vendor Representatives

Electric service and other amenities need to be ordered directly from the River's Edge Convention Center

Attendee Rates

- \$ 75 October 23
- \$150 October 24 or October 25
- \$275 Full Registration October 23-25

*\$25 cancellation fee

No Refunds After October 14th

October 23-25, 2023
LaCrosse Convention Center

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Office of Transit and Active Transportation



Introduction to OTAT's New Director Sarah Ghandour

For many of us, winding roads have led to our careers in transit and Sarah Ghandour's career, the new *Office of Transit and Active*

Transportation Director, has been no different. Sarah gained a deep appreciation for public transit in her younger years while living in Brooklyn, New York. During that time of her life she was completely dependent on public transportation, and while she found it a bit loud to live in an apartment above the G Line subway, she appreciated the convenience of being so close to a transit station.

In addition to becoming a transit-user and enthusiast, Sarah spent time working on various multi-modal planning and urban design projects as a consultant in the Los Angeles area. However, she eventually felt the pull to return to her roots in Minnesota and accepted a position with Metro Transit on the METRO Green Line Extension project, where she later became the Manager of Design. In early 2021, Sarah joined the Minnesota Department of Transportation, where she spent the last two plus years as the Director of Metro District's Transit Section.

While her educational background was primarily in Architecture (Sarah earned a Master's Degree in Architecture from the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York, and a Bachelor's Degree in Architecture from the University of Minnesota), she was always drawn to public service because she could more directly, positively impact people and communities. Sarah grew up in a rural area in Minnesota, where her mother was a high school teacher and service-oriented life was the norm. These roots likely imparted a desire to give back, which Sarah is looking forward to doing with the Greater Minnesota community of transit providers. She is optimistic for the challenges and excited to get to know the people and learn more about our transit systems.

Public transit, in various forms, has been a part of Sarah's life and career for many years and she is excited to positively impact transit and active transportation in Greater Minnesota in her new role. Please join me in welcoming her to our incredible community of transit professionals!

OTAT Office News

It has been an extremely busy summer in the Office of Transit and Active Transportation (OTAT)! From solicitations to the State Fair, we've been diligently moving the needle to positively impact the work we are all committed to.

If you are receiving the OTAT update emails, you undoubtedly have noticed some staffing changes and job openings. We are excited to be adding the Sustainable Fleet and Facilities Project Manager position that will help us to focus on sustainable and environmentally responsible fuel choices, as well as providing us with better capacity to take advantage of discretionary funding opportunities that the Federal Transit Administration offers.

Some quick highlights from the last few months include rolling out solicitations for operating and technology, planning for our next large capital, facilities, and vehicle replacement solicitations, significant progress on our process improvement projects that are looking for ways to reduce work/improve efficiencies on several processes including reporting, procurement, and eventually our solicitations process. We'll be looking for transit partner feedback on several of these processes during our Transit Advisory Committee meeting on Wednesday, September 27th – in person – in St. Cloud. (Please plan to join us!) Our office has also been making progress on improvements to the user-experience for our transit website and identifying and tracking work requests in and for our office through a unified calendar, which we look forward to rolling out soon. OTAT's shared mobility work has included the exciting roll-out of the transit planner app (currently in beta form) and the Moving Greater Minnesota Forward program that is the first innovative mobility incubator in the U.S. to focus on the dynamics and needs of rural, tribal, and small urban areas with less than 200,000 people. Our RTAP program is finalizing contract negotiations to roll out the 2nd version of our Leadership Training Program for current and aspiring transit leaders. Comprehensive reviews, Drug and Alcohol program reviews, fleet, and facility inspections, etc ... etc ... etc ... continue to occur and we appreciate your help and support in making these go smoothly.

Office of Transit and Active Transportation

We've also been having a lot of fun talking with Minnesotans at the State Fair and advocating for the work you all do in helping people get where they need to go. Building awareness and encouraging the use of Public Transit in Greater Minnesota, in addition to Shared Mobility and Active Transportation options, is an important goal for our time at the State Fair and we appreciate all the time our staff and partners have given to this effort.



We couldn't recap the summer with mentioning how thrilled OTAT staff were to participate in July's MPTA Bus Rodeo in Rochester, Minnesota. There is hardly a better opportunity to support our Minnesota transit drivers and to applaud and appreciate the incredible work they do every day. Congratulations to the winners and to the drivers who braved the stress and challenge of tough competition to put their skills to the test. It is always a pleasure and an honor to assist with the planning and execution of the rodeo competition and to show support for our awesome drivers in this way. OTAT's new Director, Sarah Ghandour, also indicated that she was really impressed with the organization of the competition and had such a great time meeting a lot of the folks there. (Thank you for making her feel so welcome ... especially since it truly was her first rodeo!)



Finally, one more reminder: please plan to join us in person on September 27th in St. Cloud for the next Transit Advisory Committee meeting! If you need to be included in the calendar invite, please reach out to Melinda Estey at melinda.estey@state.mn.us or to your Transit Project Manager.

Submitted by Melinda Estey, MnDOT OTAT Communications Coordinator

THANK YOU MPTA CONTRIBUTORS!



Since 1966, we've been behind many innovative, thoughtful, and future-focused design solutions and services throughout the Midwest. We're set apart by the diversity of services we offer and markets we serve. We approach each project as a challenge and an opportunity, leveraging our collective knowledge to offer dynamic solutions.

Our highly experienced team, coupled with our people-centric approach, has helped us nurture lasting partnerships with clients, who turn to us time and time again to deliver on their visions.

This past spring, Metro Transit quietly opened a new bus garage in Minneapolis. Each morning, buses depart from the facility to deliver riders to destinations across the metro, and each night they return to be washed, refueled, and maintained. The building also houses space for bus drivers, dispatch, and staff training.

The massive 657,970-square-foot garage was designed by LHB, with Hallberg Engineering, HDR, HNTB, and Stantec serving as subconsultants. Sited on a 10+ acre parcel, the building has a footprint equivalent to six football fields. It faces the Heywood Garage (updated by [LHB's Government Studio](#) in 2020) and adjoins the agency's headquarters campus, just west of the downtown core.

Schmitt & Sons

At Schmitt & Sons, we are passionate about providing public transportation to our local communities. We believe that public transit enhances the communities we serve by stimulating economic growth and development, provides a sustainable transportation option, and offers a higher quality of life to passengers who rely on our services.

Since 1952 the Schmitt and Sons fleet has expanded from one bus to over 300 buses today, including school buses, mid-coaches, and motorcoaches.

Since 2016 the Schmitt and Sons has been an employee-owned enterprise, which means everyone has a real incentive to make the business a success.

Public transit fares rise, some will no longer get service

Brainerd fares to rise Aug. 21 to \$3 for regular rides and \$6 for same-day service. Crow Wing County reduces service to only serve Pequot Lakes and Crosby.

Christopher Henning, an amputee who uses a wheelchair, has used the public transit bus for two years to get to medical appointments.

When the transit service called him recently to say they were discontinuing the service that came to his home on St. Mathias Road just south of Brainerd, he was surprised.

"I expected it to go up," he said of bus fares. "But I didn't expect them to do away with the whole program altogether."

Henning accessed the bus service through the dial-a-ride option, calling in advance to get picked up for medical appointments. He said he loves his St. Mathias country home where his grandchildren visit him, but now he isn't sure he can stay there.

"There is the possibility I'll have to sell my house, which is terrible," he said. "... I think the public needs to know what is going on."

Commissioner Paul Koering also spoke with Henning and noted there was some confusion as to whether the vote to reduce the number of times the bus serves Pequot Lakes and Crosby also eliminated Dial-A-Ride in the county, but he confirmed that for Henning. Koering said he understands it's a difficult situation, but it also comes down to the question of how much should the government provide. Koering said he is not willing to tax everyone via property taxes to subsidize the service.

Commissioner Jon Lubke said he is still learning about all the services and researched Dial-a-Ride information when he responded to a concerned resident.

"Well, if we're not getting the funds to do that, and they're reducing those funds, we raise the rates," Lubke said of the Minnesota Department of Transportation, which pays the majority of the costs. "And that isn't going to be enough. We have to reduce the services."

Public transit fares in Brainerd will rise beginning Aug. 21.

The cost of a ride within Brainerd city limits will increase from \$2.25 to \$3 each way, while same-day rides will go from \$4.50 to \$6 to help compensate for funding shortfalls in past couple years.

The public transit system is a public cooperative among Brainerd, Baxter, Crow Wing County and until recently Pine River. The Minnesota Department of Transportation covers the majority of the costs, but after funding the system at 95% in 2023, MnDOT plans to decrease that funding to 92% of costs in 2024 and 85% for subsequent years, provided none of those years exceeds a set percentage increase of the state/federal grant amount from the previous year. Under the current contract with Blue Sky Transit, Brainerd pays the highest share of the remaining costs at 46%, followed by Crow Wing County at 35%, Baxter at 12% and Pine River at 7%.

When faced with the option to significantly raise fares, the Pine River City Council adopted a resolution formally requesting the discontinuation of the transit service to Pine River, effective July 14.

In order to meet projected revenue shortfalls, Pine River's rates would have increased from \$1 within city limits and \$2 outside city limits to \$20 within city limits and \$25 outside city limits.

Staff recommendations for increases in Baxter were \$6 each way for regular rides within the city (up from \$2.25) and \$10 each day for same-day fares (up from \$4.50). Baxter City Council members opted to go beyond the recommendation, raising rates to \$7 and \$11, respectively.

Duluth Transit Authority offers more service, but to fewer Superior neighborhoods



DTA

By Shelley Nelson—Superior Telegram

Aug 4, 2023 at 6:00 AM

Mayor Jim Paine says the Duluth Transit Authority's Better Bus Blueprint is a big expansion of transit services in Superior.

The plan will add route frequency, later hours and holiday service for the first time in Superior; people going to or coming from Duluth will be able to do so after 10 p.m. Currently, all buses in Superior stop running before 8 p.m.

However, the new routes didn't come without sacrifice, said Chris Belden, DTA director of planning and grants.

Service to Billings Park and South Superior will be eliminated when the new routes go into effect Aug. 27.

The new routes in Superior include the Superior Circulator route, which runs from downtown Superior to the Itasca neighborhood, running through the University of Wisconsin-Superior, Superior High School, the Mariner Business and Retail Center on Hill Avenue, the East Fifth Street business district and along East Second Street hourly.

"What's happened is it's a bus system that is trying to do too much with too little resources and not doing any of it well," Belden said. "By trying to do too much and not doing any of it well, that results in low ridership and low return on investment from the city, state and federal partners."

Belden said that has resulted in Superior coming in dead last among similar size cities in Wisconsin when it comes to fare collections.

A variety of surveys have revealed that what the DTA is doing is not meeting a lot of needs and later service has been requested most, Belden said.

"There's never been holiday service in Superior and very little weekend service," Belden said. "In order to meet those needs and at the same time not having additional funding from the state, we had to reorganize our service to meet that demand."

The Better Bus Blueprint will reduce the number of routes, streamline bus stops to keep the buses moving and use technology to create efficiency.

Belden said the biggest positive impacts will be in Superior of all the route changes in the system. He said the new routes created a 400% increase in access to jobs.

Sen. Smith learns about everything from farming concerns to public transit projects in Spring Grove, Rushford & Rochester



It was a tour to hear from her constituents; Senator Tina Smith made her way across southeast Minnesota Thursday with stops in Spring Grove, Rushford, and Rochester.

Smith began her day in Spring Grove listening to the community on how they recovered from a downtown fire in December of 2022 and how the local grocery store has survived the rising issue of grocery store deserts.

Smith's final stop of the day in Rochester focused on how the community has used resources to get people better connected through public transit, as funding was secured to build a new park and ride next to 125 Live.

"One of the things that our members have mentioned that they are excited about is the

potential of coming here and working out or doing some of their social programming is getting on the bus and going downtown, getting some lunch with their friends or shopping," said Kari Etrheim, 125 Live Board President.

Construction won't begin on this park and ride until next summer. The city of Rochester has received \$7.4 million in federal funds for the project. Officials expect the facility to contribute a 30% reduction in car fueled emissions by 2025 once it opens.

Rochester Public Transit adds 2 electric buses to fleet

The fleet of Rochester Public Transit's electric vehicles doubled.

The city received a pair of New Flyer Xcelsior 60-foot battery electric transit buses, which are nearly identical to the two electric buses that started operating in the city a year ago.

As with the 2022 shipment, a portion of the cost of the new vehicles is covered by a grant from the Federal Transit Administration's Low or No Emission Vehicle Program.

After testing, certification and licensing, the new buses will be deployed to serve RPT's park-and-ride facilities at peak times.

"We are pleased with the performance of the two New Flyer Xcelsior 60s we put in service last year," Rochester Public Transit Project Manager Mike Collins said in a statement announcing the arrival of the new buses. "They have had very little downtime, and have performed much as we expected."

The 60-foot buses have the larger capacity, which means fewer customers are forced to stand on busy trips. They also offer quiet operation.

The buses, manufactured in St. Cloud, have a storage capacity of 525 kWh, offering an operating range of approximately 150 miles, depending on conditions.

RPT already has charging infrastructure in place to accommodate the new vehicles.

Lesley Kandaras named general manager for Metro Transit in Minnesota

Kandaras has worked for both Metro Transit and the Metropolitan Council and will be the first woman to permanently hold the position of general manager.



The Metropolitan Council (Met Council) has named Lesley Kandaras as the next general manager of Metro Transit, which serves the seven counties in the Twin Cities metro area. She brings experience working for the Met Council and Metro Transit and will be tasked with providing leadership, vision and operational and administrative management for Metro Transit. She also becomes the first woman to permanently fill the position at Mass Transit.

“I firmly believe Lesley is the right person for this position because she recognizes how important transit is to the economic vitality, environmental sustainability and quality of life in the Twin Cities,” said Met Council Chair Charlie Zelle. “She is a well-respected leader with a deep knowledge and understanding of how transit can improve the quality of life for our region. I am confident her distinguished track record of leadership and innovation will help foster a metro area that is livable, prosperous, sustainable and equitable for all.”

At Metro Transit, Kandaras has served as senior manager-policy development, chief of staff and interim general manager. Kandaras began at the Met Council in 2012, working in the Communications and Government Affairs departments and implementing inter-divisional initiatives.

As chief of staff, she served as an adviser to the general manager and led Metro Transit's Administration and Executive Affairs Department, which includes Outreach, Communications, Marketing and Transit Information, Equity and Inclusion, and Strategic Initiatives.

A regular transit rider, Kandaras has championed efforts to center customers and staff in the organization's decision-making processes. She was instrumental in the creation of the agency's Safety & Security Action Plan and is an enthusiastic supporter of Metro Transit's Great Workplace Project, an employee-driven effort to create a more effective and inclusive workplace.

“As the demand for transportation and mobility continues to grow, Lesley is approaching this important work as both an opportunity and challenge,” said Debra Barber, chair of the Met Council's Transportation Committee. “She fully understands the importance of leveraging Metro Transit as much as possible because our regional system has capacity to grow.”

2023 Photo Contest: This is Rural Transit

The National RTAP 2023 Photo Contest – This is Rural Transit – is all about the “rural” in rural transit. We asked for photos that showcase the beauty and uniqueness of rural areas and tribal lands and highlight what makes small towns special. We received photos of rural areas with rolling hills, peaceful streams, bustling Main Streets, fun summer community events, and more.

Awards: First Prize: \$400, Second Prize: \$200, Third Prize: \$100. Winners also received plaques, and all entries also received certificates. Entries will be showcased on our website and social media and displayed at one or more upcoming conferences.

Judging Criteria

Photo quality

Artistic design

Originality

Creative depiction of this year’s theme: This is Rural Transit

Winners

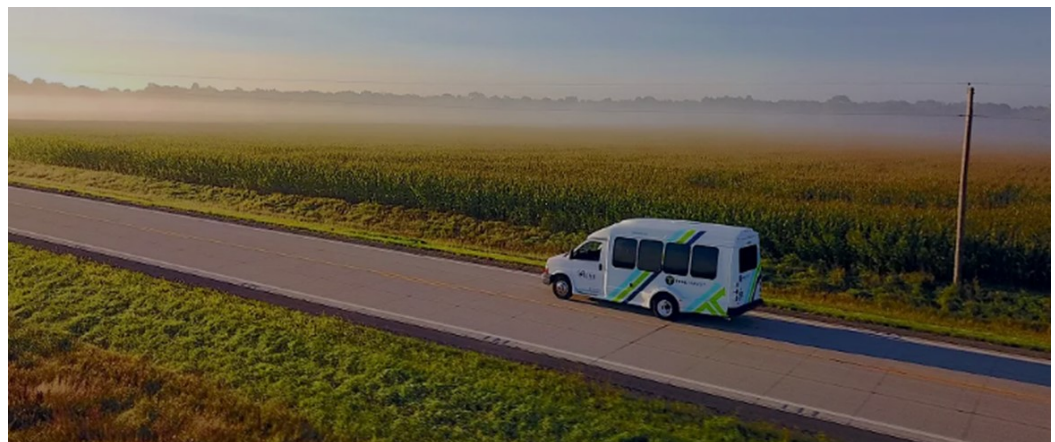
First Place

True Transit

Mankato, MN

Photographer: Paige Schuette

Marketing & Communications Manager



Autonomous vehicle transit pilot in rural Minnesota to expand with \$9.3M federal grant

AMERICAN
CITY & COUNTY

Written by Andy Castillo
21st June 2023

Ten months into its 18-month-long pilot initiative, an autonomous vehicle transit program in rural Minnesota, goMARTI (Minnesota's Autonomous Rural Transit Initiative), has received a \$9.3 million federal technology grant to expand into Grand Rapids, Minn.



Since launching with a fleet of five self-driving vehicles in September (three of which have ADA-compliant wheelchair ramps), goMARTI has provided on-demand service to about 70 pick-up and drop-off points in a 16.5 square-mile area. The expansion will add community-requested stops to the east and south of the current area, including Minnesota North College Itasca, Second Harvest North Central Food Bank and Walmart.

“Connecting residents with these rural community destinations will allow for equitable access to critical services in the region through a convenient and reliable shared mobility option. We are excited about continuing the state’s interagency collaboration between the Iron Range and MnDOT in the state’s transition to shared, electric and automated transportation,” said Ida Rukavina, commissioner of Minnesota’s Iron Range Resources & Rehabilitation board in a statement. With the federal Advanced Transportation Technology and Innovation Program grant and additional “EV infrastructure planning underway, northeastern Minnesota is well positioned to help create a better future for rural transportation.”

Along with the added stops, administrators are planning to use the funding to add another autonomous vehicle to the fleet along with three fully electric, non-autonomous vehicles that will serve the Grand Rapids area and the nearby communities of Cohasset and La Prairie, Minn.

While initially launched to help people in rural Minnesota get to and from jobs, medical and other appointments, the expansion will reach a new population.

“Expanding goMARTI to Minnesota North College Itasca is a big win for our current and prospective students,” said Dr. Michael Raich, president of Minnesota North College in the statement. “Reliable transportation is a barrier for many people, and this free and convenient shuttle option will make college much more accessible to those who don’t live on or near campus. This project also presents an opportunity for our college to prepare our future workforce by exposing students to emerging technologies and careers in the transportation industry.”

The grant will also be used to integrate goMARTI into the Minnesota Department of Transportation’s (MnDOT) trip planning platform, the Transit App, which is currently being used in southern Minnesota. Funding will also support continued research from the University of Minnesota Center for Transportation Studies and workforce development efforts with Minnesota North College. Minnesota North College will be developing curriculum to leverage the project creating student experience opportunities, new curriculum opportunities and career pathways in new technology.

Central Community Transit Collaborates on Fare-Free Pilot Project

Understanding that transportation is a social determinant of health but knowing that bus fares can be prohibitive, Mid-Minnesota Regional Transportation Coordinating Council (MMRTCC) Mobility Manager Terry Smith worked with Central Community Transit (CCT), the local public transit operator, to devise a fare-free bus ride pilot. A project that would show the value of increased transit investment, as more Willmar residents got to the store, clinic, and other important destinations.

It was quickly determined that a pilot of no less than 6 months' duration would be needed to adequately determine impact. Also, that an effective and efficient strategy would be to encourage transit use, by making all rides originating and ending at an established Willmar bus stop available without fare. This would give non-drivers more incentive to use the bus for outings – medical appointments, shopping, social engagements, and more. MMRTCC and CCT hypothesized this might drive more people to the established stops and reduce dependence on dial-a-ride service, thereby improving efficiency. This, during the midst of a widespread driver shortage.

Once this plan was established, MMRTCC went to work on an application for a local Impact Grant, an opportunity made available by the Willmar Area Community Foundation (WACF), a local and well-respected benefactor. In doing so, Smith gathered fare-free ride promotion commitments from over two dozen local organizations. In May, MMRTCC received word that they had been granted \$20,000 by WACF. Of this, \$18,000 would be used by CCT, to cover the missing fares and market fare-free rides. MMRTCC would use the remaining \$2,000 for additional outreach.

The fare-free pilot project will run from July through December 2023. One month in, CCT reported a marked increase in bus stop ridership. It is hoped that, as the benefit of fare-free ridership is shown, additional public or private funding can be found to extend the fare-free option for the long term.



Federal Funding Opportunities

USDOT is now accepting applications for the second year of its [Strengthening Mobility and Revolutionizing Transportation \(SMART\) Grants Program](#). This SMART [Notice of Funding Opportunity \(NOFO\)](#) will accept applications for Stage 1 Planning and Prototyping grants. During Stage 1, the SMART program seeks to fund innovation aimed at solving real-world transportation problems and focused on building data and technology capacity and experience for State, local, and Tribal governments. The program also recognizes that many public sector transportation agencies face challenges finding the resources and personnel to leverage new technologies; so, the program builds in the time and support to enable successful deployment. **Applications must be submitted by 5:00 p.m. ET on Tuesday, October 10, 2023, to the [Valid Eval submission website](#).** Visit the [SMART Grants Webinars webpage](#) to find information on upcoming webinars and to find past webinar materials.



**Federal Transit
Administration**

USDOT anticipates releasing the FY 2023 Thriving Communities Program (TCP) NOFO and Call for Letters of Interest (LOI) in September. The TCP funds Capacity Builders to provide technical assistance, planning, and capacity building support to disadvantaged and under-resourced communities across the U.S. to help them advance the transformative transportation projects needed to thrive. The [TCP website](#) will be updated with more information about the FY 2023 program when it is available. In the meantime, check out the [list of Capacity Builders and communities selected in the first year of the program](#).

The Federal Transit Administration is accepting applications for its [Pilot Program for Transit-Oriented Development \(TOD\) Planning](#), which makes approximately \$13 million available to fund local comprehensive or site-specific planning to support housing and other investment near transit hubs to promote sustainable, livable, and equitable communities. Special consideration will be given to applications that improve air quality, advance environmental justice, support unhoused populations, and promote housing affordability. This year, applications for areas with a lower population density or lower average income compared to surrounding areas will receive a higher federal funding share. Additionally, applications with a substantial focus on affordable housing may receive up to 100% federal cost share support. FTA hosted a program webinar on August 17 to discuss the requirements for funding, application eligibility and criteria, and the submission process – [view the presentation and recording from the webinar](#). **Applications are due to GRANTS.GOV (FTA-2023-011-TPE-TODP) by October 10, 2023.**

[Understanding Non-Federal Match Requirements](#)

[Grant Application Checklist for a Strong Transportation Workforce and Labor Plan](#)

[Checklist for a Strong Climate Change Mitigation, Adaptation and Resilience Grant Application](#)

[Federal Tools to Determine Disadvantaged Community Status](#)

[What Is a Benefit-Cost Analysis \(BCA\)?](#)

[Use of DOT Funds for Public Involvement](#)

Upcoming Events:



**Minnesota/
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