

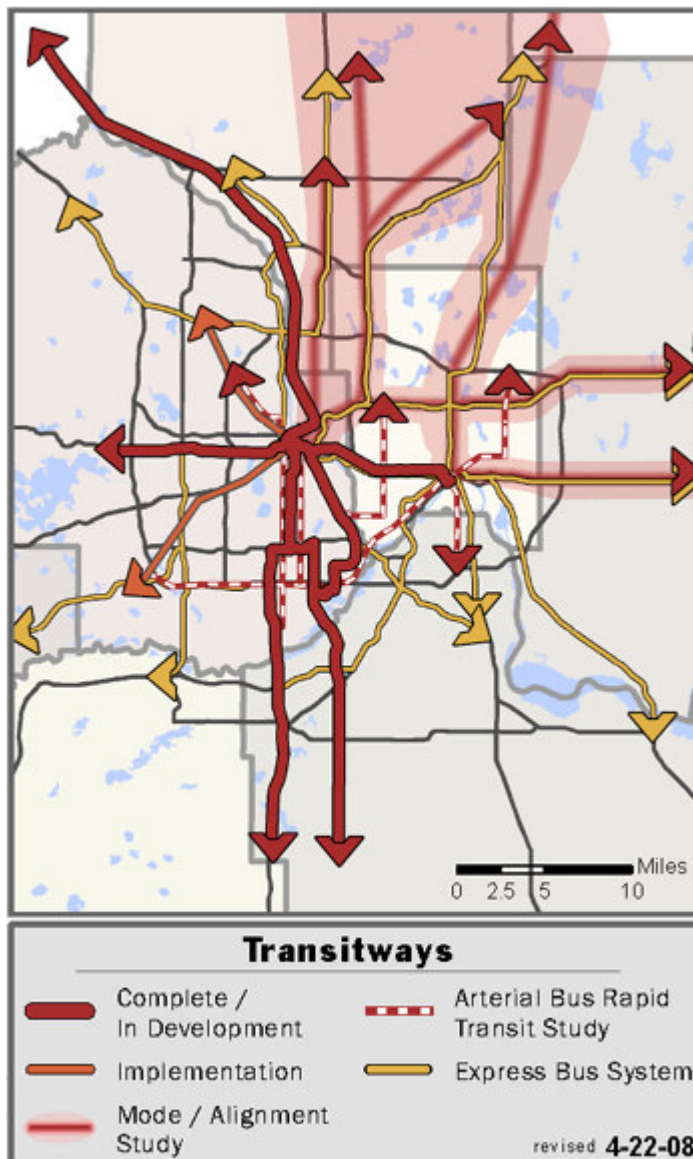
Council unveils updated transit study

Two corridors show most potential for light rail

(from Met Council website)

A recent analysis by the Metropolitan Council and its transportation partners shows that two transportation corridors – Southwest and Bottineau – have potential for light-rail transit. The analysis also shows that eight corridors ought to be investigated for bus rapid transit (BRT).

Additional analysis is recommended in five broad corridors in the north, east and northeast metro area that hold promise for high ridership, but for which the preferred mode of transit is not yet clear.



Local, regional and state officials studied the potential for rail, bus rapid transit and express bus service in more than two dozen corridors. The map identifies transitways that are either currently in operation, in development, under study for implementation,

designated for potential BRT or express bus service in the future, or are recommended for further study to determine the best mode. [See larger map](#) (pdf).

The analysis of more than two dozen potential transit corridors is part of the 2030 Transit Master Study, which is being drafted this spring. The study will update one first done in 1999 at the request of the Minnesota Legislature, and the results will be used as the Council updates its 2030 Transportation Policy Plan (TPP) this year.

In addition to analyzing corridors for their potential as rail or BRT “transitways,” the study outlines bus system improvements and recommends ways to plan land use to maximize transit effectiveness. The preliminary study results are being presented to county officials for feedback and fine-tuning.

“The list of corridors submitted for rail consideration shows there is a lot of interest in developing transit options in the region,” said Amy Vennewitz, deputy director of the Council’s Metropolitan Transportation Services division and chair of the study’s technical advisory committee. “While two corridors look most promising for rail development, we have several other corridors with very strong transit ridership potential.”

Crunching the numbers

For more than six months, technical advisors from the Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT), the Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, and the region’s regional rail authorities and transit operators met regularly with Council transportation planners and a Council consultant. Together, they:

- Identified corridors with transit problems and opportunities.
- Determined criteria for comparing regional costs and benefits.
- Reviewed data generated by ridership- and cost-modeling tools.

The analysis compares projected rider numbers, as well as capital and operating costs, for each corridor. In the end, two corridors – Southwest and Bottineau – show the greatest potential for light rail, making them high priorities for transitway investments.

Potential transit ridership also looks strong in five broad corridors: Central Ave. N., Anoka County/I-35W North, Trunk Highway 36/Northeast, I-94 East and Rush Line (paralleling I-35E north from St. Paul). The study recommends evaluating these corridors further for feasibility of specific alignments and modes. The Midtown/29th Street Corridor also has potential as a link between the Southwest and Hiawatha Lines, the study suggests.

Bus rapid transit looks promising in some corridors

In eight other highly traveled corridors, higher costs or right-of-way constraints make rail service unlikely by 2030. The study recommends evaluating BRT for these corridors: Broadway Avenue, Nicollet Avenue and Chicago Avenue (Minneapolis), Snelling Avenue, East 7th Street, Robert Street and West 7th Street (St. Paul) and I-494/American Boulevard (Bloomington and Richfield).

BRT is new to the region. It has many features similar to light rail and functions much like a train. It emphasizes “rapid” transportation improvements that make buses much faster. BRT may include:

- Technology that changes traffic signals when buses approach

- Off-board fare collection, resulting in faster boarding
- Unique stations
- Other features that make BRT a faster and better experience compared with traditional bus service.

With the exception of the Northstar Line – which is scheduled to begin operations in late 2009 – projected ridership for commuter rail lagged far behind ridership for other forms of transit studied.



Eight corridors, highlighted here, should be studied for BRT in the future, the study says. 1) Broadway Ave.; 2) Nicollet Ave.; 3) Chicago Ave.; 4) Snelling Ave.; 5) E. 7th St.; 6) Robert St. S. 7) W. 7th St.; and 8) I-494/American Blvd.

“We don’t yet have any actual experience with commuter rail in this region, and we could find our actual ridership numbers are better than those in the model,” said Vennewitz. As a result, the study recommends that the Council reevaluate commuter rail in four years, incorporating regional experience from Northstar operations, for the next TPP update in 2012.

Express bus service appears to be the most feasible mode until 2030 in several corridors, including the Red Rock corridor from St. Paul to Hastings.

Bus service improvements could have big impact

On the bus side, the transit study shows the region’s bus system can significantly increase the number of people using buses by implementing recommended improvements. Faster service, more frequent service to more locations, more park-and-ride facilities and more roadway features providing a traffic “edge” to buses can help, according to the study.

“Regional bus ridership has increased 23% since 1996, during a time when the region invested in more transit centers, park-and-ride lots, new limited-stop bus service on urban corridors, new express service from the suburbs and bus-only shoulder lanes,” said Vennewitz. “We know these investments draw commuters to transit, which takes cars off congested roads and improves air quality.”

When rail service is added to the mix, total transit ridership rose 37% between 1996 and 2007. Hiawatha light rail opened for service in 2004.

Upgrading service to BRT for corridors on arterial roads, and improving highways to include priced lanes and bus priority, can also lure motorists out of their cars, the study found. The study, recognizing that commutes from beyond the seven-county region impact congestion within the region, also recommends MnDOT explore long-distance, express commuter routes, especially from counties north of the region.



The study recommends exploring, in cooperation with the Minnesota Department of Transportation, long-distance express bus routes in these corridors.

“We’re trying to demonstrate a reasonable, feasible network to meet the expected growth in demand,” said John Levin, Director of Service Development for Metro Transit. Planners will next develop scenarios to show what could be done to grow the bus system under three scenarios: fiscally constrained, with limited additional resources and with enhanced resources, Levin said.

The Transit Master Study and an accompanying Principal Arterial Study, which examines ways to best invest the region’s limited highway construction dollars, will help shape the TPP. The update process has begun, as the Council presents preliminary study results to county and state officials for feedback.

The TPP will be drafted in consultation with the Technical Advisory Committee of the Council’s Transportation Advisory Board (TAB) and posted on the Council’s website for public comment. A public hearing draft will be reviewed by the TAB and is scheduled to be adopted by the Council in early October, followed by a formal public hearing in November. Adoption of the final plan is scheduled for December.