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Minnesota Issue Guide

Light Rail and Commuter Transit

This guide is compiled by staff at the Minnesota Legislative Reference Library on a topic of interest to state legislators. It introduces the topic and points to sources for further research. It is not intended to be exhaustive.

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With the opening of the METRO Green Line (Central Corridor) in June 2014, the downtowns of St. Paul and Minneapolis are linked by rail transit for the first time since Twin City Rapid Transit streetcar lines met their demise in the 1950s. The METRO Green Line is the first expansion of the area's light rail system since the opening of the METRO Blue Line (Hiawatha Line) in 2004. The two lines connect in downtown Minneapolis.

The Twin Cities' light rail transit (LRT) system has been a work in progress for years, its roots stretching back to the 1970s when heavy rail and "downtown people movers" were studied as transit options. By the early 1980s, LRT had moved to the forefront of transit planning. The 1980s and 1990s were filled with LRT studies, evaluations, and planning efforts. On January 17, 2001, ground was broken for the region's first LRT line along Hiawatha Avenue, connecting downtown Minneapolis, the Minneapolis/St. Paul International Airport, and the Mall of America in Bloomington.

The next expansion of the region's rail transit system occurred in late 2009 with the opening of the Northstar Corridor, a 40-mile commuter rail line running from the Big Lake area south to downtown Minneapolis, followed by the opening of the Green Line in June 2014.

Efforts to expand the Blue and Green Lines that would serve areas north, south, and west of downtown Minneapolis are underway. The Southwest Corridor, currently under construction, will connect with the Green Line near Target Field in downtown Minneapolis and extend to Eden Prairie. Planning has also begun along the Bottineau Corridor, which would serve as a Blue Line extension toward Robbinsdale, Brooklyn Center, and Maple Grove.

Commuter transit expansion also includes Bus Rapid Transit (BRT). BRT systems combine improved infrastructure, vehicles, and technology to provide faster, more efficient service. Service began on the METRO Red Line in 2013, a BRT line stretching from the Mall of America to Apple Valley on Cedar Avenue. The A Line began service in 2016, the C Line began service in 2019, and other BRT routes have been established since.

Twin Cities transit has come full circle, with both Minneapolis and St. Paul studying streetcar systems and routes for the future.

Light Rail and Commuter Transit Timeline

1975: Minnesota Legislature prohibits the Metropolitan Transit Commission from using transit tax levies for any preliminary work on an automated fixed guideway system. (*Laws of Minnesota 1975*, chapter 13, section 71(d))

1980: Minnesota Legislature directs the Metropolitan Council to conduct a feasibility study of light rail transit in the metropolitan area. (*Laws of Minnesota 1980*, chapter 607, article 13, section 3)

1984: Minnesota Legislature creates Regional Transit Board. (*Laws of Minnesota 1984*, chapter 654, article 3, section 116)

1985: Minnesota Legislature prohibits any expenditure of public funds on light rail transit. (*Laws of Minnesota 1Sp 1985*, chapter 10, section 105)

1987: Minnesota Legislature removes the 1985 prohibition by giving any regional rail authority the ability to study, plan, or design a light rail transit system. (*Laws of Minnesota 1987*, chapter 405, section 4) In addition, the Metropolitan Council is allowed to cooperate with the regional rail authorities in light rail transit planning. (*Laws of Minnesota 1987*, chapter 405, section 3)

1988: Minnesota Legislature appropriates $4.17 million (if matched with dollar for dollar amounts from other funding sources) for regional railroad authorities to plan, design and construct light rail transit facilities. (*Laws of Minnesota 1988*, chapter 684, article 2, section 2)

1989: Minnesota Legislature requires the Regional Transit Board to adopt a regional light rail plan. (*Laws of Minnesota 1989*, chapter 339, section 12)

Minnesota Legislature creates the Joint Light Rail Transit Advisory Committee to assist the Regional Transit Board in LRT planning. (*Laws of Minnesota 1989*, chapter 339, section 13)

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1991: Minnesota Legislature creates the Light Rail Transit Joint Powers Board. (*Laws of Minnesota 1991*, chapter 298, article 7, section 8)

1993: Minnesota Legislature establishes the Corridor Management Committee (*Laws of Minnesota 1993*, chapter 353, section 12)

1994: Minnesota Legislature abolishes the Regional Transit Board. All duties and responsibilities are transferred to the Metropolitan Council. (*Laws of Minnesota 1994*, chapter 628, article 2, section 4)

1997: Minnesota Legislature authorizes the study of the potential of using freight rail corridors in the metropolitan area for commuter rail service. (*Laws of Minnesota 1997*, chapter 159, article 2, section 51)

1998: Minnesota Legislature appropriates $40 million for a light rail transit system for the Hiawatha Corridor. Another $6.5 million is appropriated for LRT study, design and engineering work of other corridors. (*Laws of Minnesota 1998*, chapter 404, section 17) On May 22, 1998, Congress passes a transportation bill which allots $120 million for the Hiawatha Corridor light rail transit project. Congress also authorizes an additional $6 million for rail transit work on the North Star Corridor (Minneapolis to St. Cloud through Anoka).

1999: Minnesota Legislature appropriates $60 million for construction of the Hiawatha Corridor LRT line. (*Laws of Minnesota 1999*, chapter 240, article 1, section 9, subdivision 5) This funding makes Minnesota eligible to receive matching federal funds for the project.

2000: *Laws of Minnesota 2000*, chapter 479, article 1, section 24, subdivision 4 gives the Metropolitan Council the right to sell or lease naming rights to light rail transit stations and to apply revenues from sales or leases to light rail transit operating costs. Starting in June, the design-build contractor and vehicle manufacturer selection process for Hiawatha Corridor begins, and construction on the line begins on October 1.

2001: In January, the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) approved a Full Funding Grant Agreements committing $334,277,500 to the rail project. Total approved funding from all sources is $675,409,818. In the early part of session, legislation is first introduced (HF137) that would place limits on planning or studying the "Dan Patch commuter rail line" between Northfield and Minneapolis. This lightly used freight line stopped providing commuter service in the 1940s. At the end of the year, the Dakota County Regional Railroad Authority and Parsons Brinckerhoff (consultants) publish the *Dan Patch Corridor Commuter Rail Feasibility Study* (HE 2771. M6 D36 2001).

2002: The Minnesota Legislature passes HF3618, an omnibus bonding bill that, among other things, prohibits the Met Council from spending money on or making any plans for the Dan Patch commuter rail line. (*Laws of Minnesota 2002*, chapter 393, section 85). In October, the first Hiawatha Corridor vehicle is delivered.

2004: Blue Line/Hiawatha Corridor LRT service begins Saturday, June 26, 2004.

2005: Minnesota Legislature approves $37.5 million for the Northstar Corridor in the 2005 bonding bill. (*Laws of Minnesota 2005*, chapter 20, article 1) In June of 2005, the United States Congress approves $80 million for the Northstar Corridor in the federal transportation bill.

2006: Minnesota Legislature approves $60 million for the Northstar Corridor in the 2006 capital improvement bonding bill. (*Laws of Minnesota 2006*, chapter 258, section 16, subdivision 4)**.** The Metropolitan Council begins planning for a Central Corridor Light Rail transit line. This rail line will connect downtown Minneapolis and downtown St. Paul along University Avenue.

2007: The Full Funding Grant Agreement for Northstar Commuter Rail is signed by state and federal officials on December 11. This agreement allots $156.8 million in federal funds and $97.5 million in state funds to the project.

2008: On April 7, Governor Pawlenty vetoes the $70 million allotted for the Central Corridor project in the 2008 bonding bill. (*Laws of Minnesota 2008*, chapter 179, section 17, subd. 5) However, in May 2008, the $70 million is restored in a supplementary bonding package. (*Laws of Minnesota 2008*, chapter 365, section 4)

2009: Summer marks the five year anniversary of the Hiawatha Line. Ridership is 20 percent ahead of what ridership was expected to be in 2020. A plan to buy more train cars to accommodate increased ridership requires the expansion of 10 LRT stations. In August, the FTA issues the Central Corridor LRT Record of Decision clearing the way for the project to proceed. By December, the Hennepin County Regional Railroad Authority approves an alignment for the Southwest light-rail transit line, a $1.2 billion rail project connecting Eden Prairie with the state's other rail lines at Target Field in Minneapolis. The choice had been pared down to two main routes. The route not chosen, through Uptown and down Nicollet Mall in Minneapolis, would cost about $600 million more than the approved route.

2010: In January, the federal government agrees to pay half of the $15.6 million to build three additional Central Corridor stations at Hamline Avenue, Victoria Street and Western Avenue on University Avenue. The funding became available after the Federal Transit Administration announced sweeping changes to federal funding requirements for light-rail and busway projects. The FTA decided to elevate livability and sustainability factors over mere cost-effectiveness. The Ramsey County Regional Rail Authority board approves spending $520,000 to go toward one of three additional stations to be included on the Central Corridor light-rail line. In May, the Metropolitan Council votes to build a third light rail transit line, the Southwest Corridor LRT, connecting downtown Minneapolis with Eden Prairie.

Metropolitan Council approves spending $152.3 million on light rail cars for the Hiawatha and Central Corridors. The Council also sends the FTA their estimates for ridership (about 29,000 passengers per weekday), and the price tag (estimated at $1.2 billion), for the Southwest Corridor line in its application to enter the preliminary engineering phase. Toward the end of the year, Ramsey County Regional Rail Authority approves $5.8 million to continue work on the Central Corridor, with no commitment on federal funding.

2011: At the start of the year, renovation work begins on Union Depot, the last stop for Central Corridor. The first LRT derailment occurs in March when lead car comes off track a few inches. There were no injuries. In April, the FTA commits $478 million to Central Corridor in a full funding agreement. The federal grant is half the project's estimated cost. By September, construction on the Central Corridor is 20% complete; by November, the University Avenue portion of the line is completed.

The St. Paul City Council votes in July to apply for $200 thousand federal grant to help finance streetcar planning. In September, the FTA gives approval to start preliminary engineering on the Southwest Corridor.

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2012: By May, the Central Corridor line is half complete, and by December, most of the traffic-obstructing construction on the line ends.

In September, Southwest Corridor Light Rail receives a $2 million grant from the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED). The *Southwest Transitway Draft Environmental Impact Statement* for the Southwest Corridor is issued by Hennepin County in October, and in the months following, Hennepin County holds public hearings during the Southwest Corridor public review and comment period. About 1000 comments are received from the public. The cities of Minneapolis and St. Louis Park each raise concerns about the plans for the Southwest Corridor. At the end of the year, Southwest Corridor light rail contracts are awarded to AECOM and Kimley-Horn rather than URS due to URS' role in the Sabo Bridge issues.

2013: In April, tests of light rail cars on the Central Corridor begin. Initial plans for Southwest Corridor line stations and route are released. Toward the end of the year, and into 2014, all possible options for routing freight and light rail tracks for the Southwest Corridor are re-examined.

The Met Council approves the Bottineau Transitway in May, a new proposed light rail line from downtown Minneapolis to Brooklyn Park. The route will connect to the Hiawatha/Blue line, the Central Corridor/Green line, the proposed Southwest line and the Northstar commuter rail at the Target Field Station.

2014: Early in the year, the Twin Cities & Western Railroad rejects a proposed reroute of freight trains through St. Louis Park in lieu of the Kenilworth Corridor as not efficient, safe, nor cost effective. The counties tell Southwest Corridor planners that funding will go to another light rail project if the conflict is not resolved soon. A new option involving a 1.1 mile tunnel below the channel is unveiled to address concerns raised by the city of Minneapolis. This option could add $85 million raising the total to $1.6 billion Another option with a shorter tunnel would add $40 million. In April, the Metropolitan Council votes in favor of the $1.68 billion Southwest light rail plan that hides the light rail line in two tunnels through the Kenilworth corridor; the freight and recreation path will be at grade level. Minn. Stat. 473.3994 requires the Met Council plan to seek consent from the cities on the route but could face rejection by Minneapolis.

Cities along the planned Southwest Corridor line hold separate hearings in early spring on the preliminary plans before their city councils vote as part of the municipal consent process. By July, the City of Minneapolis and the Metropolitan Council reach a tentative agreement on the Southwest light rail project after two months of negotiation with a mediator. The deal eliminates one of two planned tunnels passing the Cedar Lake and Lake of the Isles portions of the corridor. The modified deal awaits formal approval from both the Met Council and the Minneapolis City Council. In late August, the Minneapolis City Council becomes the last city involved in the Southwest Corridor to give formal consent. A lawsuit is filed in September by the Lakes and Parks Alliance of Minneapolis against The FTA, the Metropolitan Council, and Metropolitan Council Chair Susan Haigh. The Alliance argues that an appropriate environmental review wasn't conducted on the Kenilworth Corridor portion of the Southwest Corridor line. At the end of the year, the Metropolitan Council releases three different bridge concepts for the Kenilworth portion of the line.

The Bottineau Transitway/Blue Line Extension draft environmental impact statement is released in April, and in August the FTA approves a plan to begin design work on extending the Blue Line. The extension would connect Golden Valley, Robbinsdale, Crystal, and Brooklyn Park to the current Blue Line route.

On June 14, Green Line light rail service is launched with a weekend of free service and celebrations at many of the stations. In August, Metro Transit announces a joint project with the Minnesota Sports Facilities Authority to build a pedestrian bridge from the Vikings stadium to the Downtown East light rail station. The walkway is expected to help reduce congestion on the ground at nearby intersections.

The Metropolitan Council votes in July to advance plans for the "A Line," a bus rapid transit line on St. Paul's heavily traveled Snelling Avenue. The "arterial bus rapid transit" is the first of its kind in the Twin Cities. The line will include frequent service with fewer stops, fare-paying at stations rather than on bus for faster loading, real-time departure signs, and unique buses with wider aisles and additional doors. Construction is expected to begin in late 2014, with service starting in late 2015. A "B Line" is in planning stages for St. Paul's West 7th Street, and a "C Line" is planned for Penn Avenue in Minneapolis.

In October, Metro Transit releases an executive summary of a 10-15 year service improvement plan for expanding the local and express route bus network. According to Metro Transit, the plan will "address the types of improvements to make, how to prioritize those improvements and the resources needed. This project will combine regional vision, transit planning principles and public input."

2015: In January, the Metropolitan Council publishes *2040 Transportation Policy Plan*, focusing on the *Thrive MSP 2040* vision. On January 15, Senate bill SF108, a bill to prohibit expenditures is introduced, and planning for a Rochester Minneapolis/St. Paul Zip Rail line began (though MnDOT suspended work on this project in January 2016).

The Target Field light rail station wins an American Institute of Architects' Honor Award for Regional and Urban Design. On September 3, 2015, light rail ridership reached a milestone: 100,000 riders in a single day. The number is attributed to three major sports events occurring that day.

Early in the year, the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board votes to ask the FTA to intervene in the Southwest Light Rail Transit project, citing concern for the projects effect on the environment. In late February an agreement between the Metropolitan Council and the Minneapolis Park and Recreation Board on the Kenilworth channel issue is announced. A bridge will be built over the channel (rather than a tunnel under it) for the Southwest Corridor line. Another issue is raised in March, when a group of Minnetonka residents files a lawsuit to force the consideration of alternate routes for the Southwest Corridor line, contending the proposed route would damage Opus Hill, a wooded recreation area.

A new estimate of the cost for the Southwest Corridor line—$1.9 billion—is released in April and puts the future of the line in question. The estimate is a result of more detailed engineering reports that found environmental concerns and poor ground conditions along the route. The Metropolitan Council publishes the *Southwest LRT Supplemental Draft Environmental Impact Statement* in May and in June, an analysis by the Metropolitan Council finds that light rail continues to be the best option for the Southwest Corridor (over bus rapid transit). While costing less, bus rapid transit does not offer the same benefits as light rail and would result in less ridership. By July, the Metropolitan Council approves an altered plan and budget for the Southwest Corridor light rail line. A project update must be submitted to the FTA on August 3, 2015 for the 2016 federal budget. In late September the Minneapolis City Council gave municipal consent to the Southwest Light Rail project's revised design and budget.

In October, an increased estimate for the cost of the Bottineau Blue Line Extension is released: $1.48 billion. The estimate, representing a $500 million increase, comes after Metro Transit staff and consultants had completed 15 percent of the engineering and environmental work.

2016: The bus rapid transit A-Line opened on June 11. The Legislature took up the issue of funding for the proposed Southwest Light Rail Transit line, but did not pass the bonding bill (HF622) in the regular session. Throughout the summer, the Governor and legislative leaders discussed the possibility of a special session to address funding for the Southwest line, among other things, but by September, no agreement had been reached. Meanwhile, the Metropolitan Council published the final *Environmental Impact Statement* for the Southwest Corridor Line.

2017: On February 6, the Minnesota House of Representatives introduced HF861, the omnibus transportation finance bill. By May 10, the $6 billion transportation package passed through both chambers and was presented to the Governor. The bill would have dedicated $300 million in general fund dollars to transportation and provides a one-time payment of $70 million for the Metropolitan Council. On May 15, Dayton vetoed the bill citing the potential $17.5 million deficit that the bill leaves for Metro Transit in fiscal year 2018-2019 and a $110 million structural deficit in the next biennium.

As of September 20, the Metropolitan Council had rejected the four civil construction bids for the Southwest Light Rail, as they did not meet cost expectations and responsiveness requirements. This pushed back the expected opening of the line four month, to 2022.

2018: On March 1, the Minnesota Senate introduced SF2809. The bill proposed a reshaping of the Metropolitan Council's governance and membership structure, and elimination of the Transportation Advisory Board. The bills passed through both chambers by May 19 and were presented to the Governor. On May 30, Dayton issued a veto of the bill, citing that it would create inherent conflicts of interest for some members of the Council and would impede the Council's ability to create regional policies.

The Metropolitan Council and the FTA issued a Supplemental Environmental Assessment for the Southwest Corridor Light Rail on February 16. In May the Metropolitan Council and Hennepin County approved the project scope and budget, with funding for the $2.003 billion project coming from federal, state, and local governments. In July, the Metropolitan Council, Hennepin County, and TC&W Railroad reached an agreement to advance the Southwest Corridor project. On November 15, the civil construction contract for the project was awarded to Lunda/C.S. McCrossan. The contract is expected to create 7,500 construction jobs, totaling $350 million in payroll into the state's economy. The Council anticipates issuing a Limited Notice to Proceed in December. Construction is expected to begin in 2019, with the line projected to open in 2023.

In November, the Orange Line BRT secured all $150.7 million in available funding when the FTA announced it will be fully funding the federal share of $74.1 million. With funding secured, the project is expected to move into the final stage of construction.

2019: The Metropolitan Council applied for a Full Funding Grant Agreement for the Southwest LRT project, which would commit the federal government to pay 46 percent of the project's capital cost. Construction on the Southwest LRT project began in 2019 and is expected through 2022, with the expectation that passenger service will begin in 2023.

On June 8, 2019 the C Line BRT began service, operating from downtown Minneapolis to Brooklyn Center along Penn Avenue and Olson Memorial Highway.

2020: The Bottineau Corridor project stalled in August. Hennepin County and the Metropolitan Council reached an impasse with BNSF Railway, whose property was being proposed for the line. Metropolitan Council chair Charlie Zelle indicated they remain committed to extending the Blue Line and will explore other options.

On September 14, the Southwest LRT project received the Full Funding Grant Agreement from the FTA. In October, the Legislature passed a bonding bill, which included funding for the B Line BRT and D Line BRT.

2021: As of July, the Southwest line was about 50 percent completed. However, on portions of the line, progress was slow while some portions, specifically the Kenilworth tunnel section, were encountering significant setbacks. Project costs also continued to rise this year.

In light of project delays and increased costs, two senators requested that the Office of the Legislative Auditor consider conducting "an expedited special review" of the project. Though the Auditor's office was not able to conduct a full-scale special review at that time, they did issue a memo in October which addressed some issues between the Met Council and one of its project contractors.

2022: In January, the Met Council announced a new cost and timeline estimate for the Southwest LRT project. The cost of the project rose to $2.75 billion, and the planned opening was pushed back to 2027.

In March, the Legislature instructed the Office of the Legislative Auditor to conduct a special review and/or a program evaluation of the project and included a onetime appropriation for that review (*Laws of Minnesota 2022*, chapter 39). Their report, Southwest Light Rail Transit: Project Budget and Timeline, was released in September.

2023: The Office of the Legislative Auditor released an additional evaluation report about the Green Line extension in March: Southwest Light Rail Transit Construction: Metropolitan Council Decision Making.

2024: The Legislature placed new requirements on the Met Council for how they manage light rail construction projects, requiring that they work more closely with the Minnesota Department of Transportation on certain types of projects (see Laws of Minnesota 2024, chap. 127, art. 3, sec. 107 and Minn. Stat. 473.3999).

2025: Two new Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) lines began operation: the Gold Line BRT/Gateway Corridor in March, and the B Line BRT in June.

2026: The Northstar Commuter Rail Line ceased operation. Its last trip was January 4, 2026. Metro Transit announced in September that the Green Line extension will open on June 12, 2027.

Proposed and Existing Corridors

Various rail corridors have been proposed throughout the years. The following is a list of proposed and existing corridors.

Click on a corridor title to see reports from our Library catalog.

Light Rail/Commuter Transit Lines

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- ▶ Northstar Commuter Rail Line
- ▶ Northern Lights Express (proposed)

Bus Rapid Transit Lines

- ▶ A Line BRT
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- ▶ C Line BRT
- ▶ D Line BRT
- ▶ E Line BRT (2023 construction planned to begin)
- ▶ Orange Line BRT
- ▶ Red Line BRT
- ▶ Gold Line BRT/Gateway Corridor

Additional Proposed LRT/BRT Lines

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- ▶ Riverview Corridor
- ▶ St. Paul Northeast Corridor
- ▶ St. Paul South Corridor

Significant Books and Reports

(See also **PROPOSED AND EXISTING CORRIDORS** for additional reports.)

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(articles in reverse chronological order)

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Additional Library Resources

For historical information, check the following codes in the Newspaper Clipping File and the Vertical File:
M50.15A (Metropolitan Transit - Light Rail Transit)

For additional reports at the Legislative Reference Library, use these Library catalog searches:
Light Rail (Minnesota);

Groups Involved with Light Rail & Commuter Transit

- Hennepin County Public Transportation
- Metropolitan Council
  - Metro Transit
  - Metro Mobility
- Minnesota Public Transit Association
- St. Paul Central Corridor - Development Strategy