

Eat: Jess Fleming, Jared Kaufman share recent dining experiences. **C1**



High schools: Tartan guard C.J. Banks is our east metro boys basketball player of the year. **B1**



St. Paul: Wesley Ross, 20, builds Volta electric motorcycle business. **A3**



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MINNESOTA

Fraud ringleader is convicted

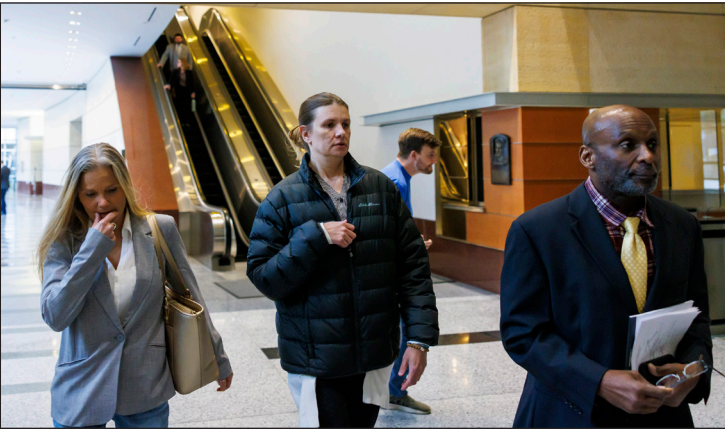
Feeding Our Future founder Bock, co-defendant Said are found guilty for their roles in COVID relief scheme

By Steve Karnowski
Associated Press

A jury found the alleged ringleader of a massive pandemic fraud case in Minnesota guilty on all counts Wednesday for her role in a scheme that federal prosecutors say stole \$250 million from a program meant to feed children in need. Aimee Bock — founder of Feeding our Future, the group at the heart of the plot — was one of 70 defendants charged in the overall case, which prosecutors said was the nation’s single largest fraud scheme

against COVID-19 relief programs. The Minnesota case has also drawn attention for an attempt to bribe a juror in an earlier trial and witness tampering in Bock’s trial in Minneapolis, which began last month. Thirty-seven defendants have already pleaded guilty, while five were convicted in a group of defendants who were tried last year. The jury also convicted a co-defendant, Salim Ahmed Said, owner of the now-defunct Safari Restaurant in Minneapolis.

FRAUD CASE » PAGE 12



KEREM YÜCEL — MINNESOTA PUBLIC RADIO VIA AP

Aimee Bock, center, executive director of Feeding Our Future, arrives at the Minneapolis federal courthouse with her attorney, Kenneth Udoibok, right, on Wednesday.

ST. PAUL » DOWNTOWN

Funding sought for arena project

City to ask state to cover half of \$769M for the X, RiverCentre, Roy Wilkins

By Frederick Melo
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Calling the home of the Minnesota Wild vital to the future of its downtown, the city of St. Paul will ask state lawmakers to cover half the cost of what’s being pitched as a \$769 million, top-to-bottom renovation of the Xcel Energy Center and St. Paul RiverCentre, with the hockey team covering 30% and St. Paul splitting the remaining 20% of the price with Ramsey County. The proposed overhaul goes beyond sprucing up the 25-year-old, 18,000-seat multi-purpose arena for concerts and hockey fans. It includes a \$150 million upgrade to the Roy Wilkins Auditorium and \$50 million in improvements to the RiverCentre convention facility, though the bulk of the spending — \$569 million — would go to the X. St. Paul Mayor Melvin Carter and Wild owner Craig Leipold will unveil their proposal at the House Capital Investment Committee on Thursday and to the Senate next Tuesday.

ARENA PROJECT » PAGE 12

East Metro

READY TO ROLL



JOHN AUTEY — PIONEER PRESS

A Metro Transit bus is parked at the Helmo Avenue station on the Gold Line in Oakdale on Tuesday. The bus will be part of the new bus rapid transit service that will run from downtown St. Paul to Woodbury beginning Saturday. The 10-mile Gold Line BRT, which operates in a dedicated lane on nearly 70 percent of the route, will stop at 16 stations along the way.

St. Paul-to-Woodbury Gold Line service begins Saturday. Here are some things to know

By Mary Divine and Talia McWright
Pioneer Press

Metro Transit bus driver Michele Selseth admits it can be a little scary learning to drive a new route and a new vehicle. Selseth will be driving one of the longest and heaviest buses in the Metro Transit fleet as part of the new Gold Line Bus Rapid Transit service, which will run between downtown St. Paul and

Woodbury starting at 5 a.m. Saturday. On Tuesday, Selseth took a group of reporters and photographers on one of the maiden voyages of the 10-mile Gold Line BRT, which operates in a dedicated lane, called a “guideway,” on nearly 70 percent of the route. “We have our own road, so we don’t have to deal with the everyday driver anymore,” Selseth said. “We will be able to get from Woodbury to downtown St. Paul a lot

faster.” Priority signals, like the ones used on Metro Transit’s light-rail system, have been installed next to traffic lights at intersections. A vertical line indicates “go,” while a horizontal line indicates “stop,” Selseth explained. “As the bus approaches, it sends a message to the light, and it will change for us,” she said. But bus drivers and other drivers still will have to look out for each other: “You have cars on

either side of you. We have a light to go, and they have a red light. ... They’re going to want to stay with us, so your head is always moving. ... We’re crossing over a busy street to get back on the guideway, so it’s been a learning curve for all drivers on this road.” The Gold Line is the only Metro Transit BRT so far to operate on its own guideway for most of its route; it operates in mixed traffic in downtown St. Paul.

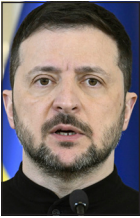
GOLD LINE » PAGE 5

UKRAINE WAR

Zelenskyy agrees to ceasefire on energy sites

By Shawn McCreesh, Michael Crowley and Maria Varenikova
New York Times

WASHINGTON » President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine agreed in a Wednesday phone call with President Donald Trump to accept Russia’s offer for a mutual pause in attacks on energy targets for 30 days as a step toward a broader ceasefire.



Volodymyr Zelenskyy

During the call, Trump also floated the idea of the United States taking control of Ukrainian power plants — an idea that Ukrainian energy experts said was probably unworkable. It was not immediately clear how or when a pause in strikes

would take hold. As the statements were issued, alarms sounded in parts of Ukraine to warn of Russian drones in the sky. Even a narrow agreement between Zelenskyy and President Vladimir Putin of Russia would leave a wide chasm between their positions on how the war could end. And Zelenskyy has characterized some of the Russian leader’s proposals as stalling tactics as he maneuvers for military advantage

and the best possible deal from the U.S. president. A joint statement from Trump’s national security adviser, Michael Waltz, and Secretary of State Marco Rubio said technical teams would meet in Saudi Arabia “in the coming days” to discuss broadening the ceasefire on energy sites to one covering activity in the Black Sea, “on the way to a full ceasefire.”

UKRAINE WAR » PAGE 8

MINNESOTA LEGISLATURE

Eichorn faces federal charge in sex case

Grand Rapids lawmaker thought he was meeting a 17-year-old girl, officials say

By Alex Derosier
aderosier@pioneerpress.com

Federal prosecutors on Wednesday filed a charge against a Minnesota state senator accused of seeking to pay for sex from someone he believed was a minor. Sen. Justin Eichorn, R-Grand Rapids, was arrested Monday after allegedly trying to meet with a 17-year-old girl who turned out to be a detective with the Bloomington Police Department.

The agency had been running an undercover operation targeting underage commercial sex and had posted an online advertisement to which Eichorn, 40, responded on March 11, the U.S. Attorney’s Office alleges. The advertisement featured images of a person who claimed to be 18.

But in messages and voice chats over several days, the undercover officer repeatedly said she was not 18, but 17 years old. Eichorn continued asking about pricing for various sex acts and arranged to meet in person, according to the charge. In messages included in the federal criminal complaint, Eichorn allegedly asked the undercover officer about how much it would cost for a “Qv” or quick visit, or a “half hour,” and whether an “outcall” visit would be possible. He also asked how much extra it would cost to not use a condom.

EICHORN CHARGED » PAGE 12

Gold Line

FROM PAGE 1

Easier boarding

The buses on the Gold Line are more than 60 feet long and bend in the middle. They have wider aisles, which allow passengers in wheelchairs to self-secure, and they feature all-door boarding.

There are 16 stations on the Gold Line, and each one features on-demand heat, real-time departure signs, security cameras and emergency telephones, said Adam Harrington, director of service development for Metro Transit.

The stations and buses are ADA accessible and also feature bicycle racks and trash and recycling cans.

“The stations are great,” he said. “There’s a lot of natural light that gets through, and the wood underside of the awning is fantastic.”

Each station has a ticket validator, which makes it much easier to get on and off as a rider, Harrington said.

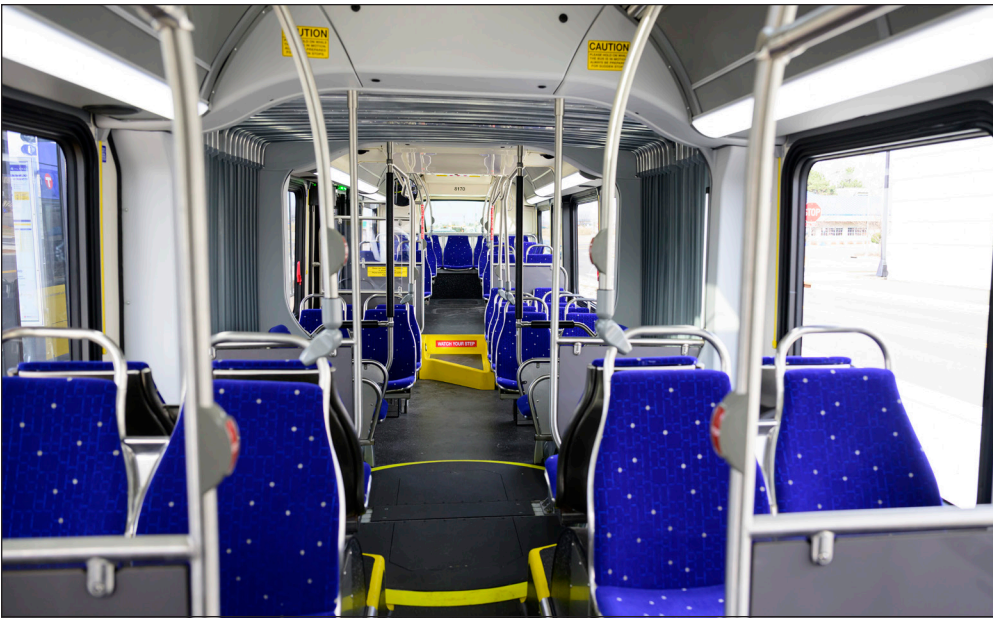
“You take your ‘Go To’ card, you tap it outside, the bus pulls up, the doors open, you get on and it goes. It’s much faster than waiting for every individual to pay their fare when they get on the bus.

“That’s really one of the main principles around bus rapid transit is you pay before you get on the bus. That way, that stop is much shorter for the bus — and everyone on the bus — and you can keep moving.”

The cost for Gold Line rides is the same as light rail and local buses, which is \$2 for ages 13 to 64 and \$1 for those who qualify for reduced fares (adults over 64, youth under 13, Medicare card holders and people with disabilities). All-day passes cost \$4 for ages 13 to 64 and \$2 for those who qualify for reduced fare.

Safety and technology

Transit Rider Investment Program agents will be responsible for inspecting fares, assisting riders and upholding the rules of rid-



PHOTOS BY JOHN AUTHEY — PIONEER PRESS

The interior of a brand-new 70-passenger articulated bus is seen on the Metro Transit Gold Line in St. Paul on Tuesday. The buses have wider aisles, which allow passengers in wheelchairs to self-secure, and they feature all-door boarding. The cost for Gold Line rides is the same as light rail and local buses.

ing, said Joseph Dotseth, acting chief of the Metro Transit Police Department. They also can provide first aid and information about social services, he said.

The buses and stations also are outfitted with a network of real-time security cameras.

“That’s going to be a game changer for us,” Dotseth said. “We have two operators that are up at the center all the time looking at the cameras throughout the system.”

The goal is to have more than 100 TRIP agents working systemwide by the end of the year; there are currently more than 70 TRIP agents working from 5 a.m. to 1 a.m. daily, he said.

Another perk for riders: Gold Line buses have USB chargers and free Wi-Fi.

Stations, park-and-rides

The Gold Line will run seven days a week, roughly 5 a.m. to midnight, serving 16 stations in St. Paul, Maplewood, Landfall, Oakdale and Woodbury.

Buses will arrive at stops every 10 minutes on weekdays and every 15 minutes on the weekends.

“This project is going to provide transit service on the east side of the east

metro area,” project director Alicia Vap said. “There hasn’t been this kind of service before.”

The Gold Line’s western terminus is located near the Xcel Energy Center in downtown St. Paul. Heading east, the line hits a number of upgraded downtown stops, connecting with the Green Line and other Metro Transit lines. Then it proceeds onto East Seventh Street, which is a long-term detour during reconstruction of the Kellogg Boulevard/Third Street bridge, toward the dedicated lanes beginning at Mounds Boulevard.

The Gold Line will have four Park and Ride facilities: Sun Ray Station in St. Paul, Helmo Station in Oakdale, Queens Station in Woodbury and Woodlane Station in Woodbury.

Stops along with way will serve 3M Corporate Headquarters in Maplewood and business centers in Oakdale and Woodbury, among other landmarks.

The Gold Line also connects with Woodbury’s new Metro Micro service.

Cost: Under budget. Ridership: TBD

The Gold Line project broke ground in October

2022 with a budget of \$505 million, funded primarily by the Federal Transit Administration and Ramsey and Washington counties.

Final project costs have not yet been tallied but a Metro Transit spokeswoman said it is expected to come in under budget.

The Gold Line will be the sixth active BRT line in the Metro Transit system, joining the Red Line, A Line, C Line, Orange Line and D Line. By 2030, Metro Transit plans to have 12 BRT lines, forming a 165-mile BRT network.

The next to open after the Gold Line will be the B Line this summer, connecting downtown St. Paul and Uptown Minneapolis along Selby and Marshall avenues in St. Paul and Lake Street in Minneapolis.

According to Vap, Gold Line ridership projections of 6,000 rides per day were calculated using Federal Transit Administration guidelines before the pandemic and have not been updated.

For comparison, the A Line, which travels between Rosedale Center and South Minneapolis along Snelling Avenue and Ford Parkway, ranged between 3,000 and 5,000 rides a day in 2024. It was hitting 4,000 to 6,000



A Gold Line bus drives past the Queens Drive station in Woodbury. The line will run seven days a week, roughly 5 a.m. to midnight, serving 16 stations in St. Paul, Maplewood, Landfall, Oakdale and Woodbury.



Jason DeWitt, a transit information support specialist with Metro Transit, adds labels to the Gold Line’s Sun Ray Station in St. Paul.

rides a day before the pandemic, according to Metro Transit.

“Before the pandemic, a lot of our service was based on the morning peak and afternoon peak,” Vap said. “Our demand has really kind of shifted as people’s travel behaviors and patterns have changed. So the peaks have gotten longer in the afternoons, they start earlier and there’s more of a demand at midday.”

Another comparison: The newer Orange Line, which travels along Interstate 35W between downtown Minneapolis and Burnsville, has been growing from fewer than 1,000 rides a day in early 2022 to nearly 2,000 rides a day in 2024.

Free rides and community celebration

An opening ceremony and celebration on Saturday will give community members the opportunity to experience the Gold Line for

themselves. It will be hosted at the Woodlane Park and Ride, 1100 Woodlane Drive in Woodbury, with a ribbon-cutting ceremony at 10 a.m., followed by community celebrations 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. at the Sun Ray and Woodlane Park and Ride stations.

“We’ll have a DJ, food trucks, there’ll be the mascots, community tables, food and lots of giveaways,” Vap said.

For the first week of the Gold Line’s debut, Ramsey and Washington counties are sponsoring free rides starting Saturday, Vap said (transfers to other lines are not included).

Looking to the future, Metro Transit plans to extend the Gold Line to downtown Minneapolis beginning in 2027, adding close to an additional 10 miles to the route.

For more information on the Gold Line, visit metrotransit.org/gold-line-facts.

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