

New east metro Gold Line bus spurs development: 'We're pleasantly surprised'

Golf, parks and a thousand places to live have been built or are in planning stages as the Gold Line prepares to make its debut between St. Paul and Woodbury.

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A future Gold Line station is seen at the intersection of 2nd St. N. and Helmo Ave. in Oakdale on Thursday. (Alex Kormann/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

Apartments and green spaces, a coffee shop, a golf spot and a brewery. The places popping up along the new Gold Line bus route into the eastern Twin Cities metro reads like a city planner's development wish list.

The \$505 million bus rapid transit (BRT) project is nearly done, with its grand opening just weeks away, and when it comes to development along the route, it seems to be a case of so far, so good.

"We're pleasantly surprised" to see the amount of investment developers have made, said Oakdale Community Development Director Andrew Gitzlaff.

The Gold Line, opening March 22, is a test case for a different kind of BRT. It's Metro Transit's first to run mostly on its own dedicated guideway, allowing buses to bypass traffic along the congested Interstate 94 corridor to serve farther-flung eastern suburbs.

Its opening comes at a tenuous time for transit in the Twin Cities, where Metro Transit may end the Northstar commuter rail and the future of transit funding is uncertain as the Trump administration cuts federal programs. The Metropolitan Council is turning away from costly, time-intensive rail projects and toward BRT.

This year alone, the agency will open three BRT routes.

The Gold Line's 10-mile route is about a 35-minute ride from downtown St. Paul to Woodlane Drive in Woodbury, with stops in Maplewood, Landfall and Oakdale.

Buses will run every 10 to 15 minutes for much of the day. In 2027, the line will be extended from St. Paul to downtown Minneapolis.

The Met Council's light-rail projects drew millions in investment as apartments sprung up along the Blue and Green lines over the past decades, but it wasn't clear at first if BRT would find similar interest.

Apartments, commercial, industrial along route

Rising seven stories out of what was recently an empty field is the Norhart Oakdale, a 328-unit luxury apartment building. Besides the ground floor coffee shop, rooftop Zen garden and fitness amenities, the building's website touts proximity to the Gold Line — a stop is outside the front doors.

Mana Brewing plans to open this summer in the Norhart's restaurant space, and development officials point to the project as an example of what a transit line can bring, with living space, recreation and work within walking distance or via a convenient public bus trip.

So-called transit-oriented development is pitched as a boon to local tax bases: Metro Transit found that since 2009, 38% of the value of permitted development in the metro region was along land surrounding high-frequency transit routes.

Those areas represent a little over 3% of the region's land.

It's also important for reinforcing transit ridership.

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“We don’t need density everywhere,” Michael Krantz, Metro Transit’s senior manager of transit-oriented development, said at a recent Metropolitan Council meeting. “But we do need density near transit in order for it to work effectively and efficiently.”



A recently built apartment complex rises behind a future Gold Line station at the intersection of 2nd St. N. and Helmo Ave. in Oakdale. (Alex Kormann/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

Norhart CEO Mike Kaeding said the Gold Line was part of his company's decision to build in Oakdale.

"We look at a lot of factors, like the community [on the whole], all the commercial space that's nearby, but the transit line was definitely a factor," he said.

He noted it hasn't been a huge factor in residents' decisions to live there — yet. In surveys, many have been indifferent or somewhat hesitant about the Gold Line.

"I've got a feeling there's a little bit of just fear of the unknown that will probably shift once they realize it's a good amenity and asset to the community," he said. Just east of Norhart, another project will see construction of a 270-unit apartment building and 100 townhomes, along with a 3-acre park with pickleball courts, a playground, basketball hoops and a dog run.

A third company, MWF, plans 100 units of multifamily housing at the corner of 4th Street and Helmo, with more apartments expected near the Gold Line's Greenway station and on the west side of Tanners Lake, near the 3M headquarters.

Building around transit

Data from the Met Council shows more than \$805 million in permitted development along the Gold Line route between 2018 and 2023, including nearly 2,300 residential units.

The data includes projects permitted since 2018, when the Gold Line's station plan was approved. They encompass most development within a half-mile of the

route — basically, walking distance — including renovations or additions to existing buildings.

While being within a half-mile of a transit station doesn't mean the development came because of transit alone, "it's all part of how the full system works," said Amy Yoder, a Metro Transit planner focused on transit-oriented development.

"They're still recognizing the value of being on that street, being in that location," Yoder said. "And whether or not it's a conscious connection, it's part of what makes these corridors successful."

Yoder said development along the Gold Line is so far on track with other BRT lines around the Twin Cities at the equivalent time in their service life, including the Orange Line, which goes from Minneapolis to Burnsville and the A Line, from Minneapolis to Roseville. That's an encouraging sign for the route, in general, because market conditions are less favorable for the new line. While much of Gold Line-adjacent development is in St. Paul, Yoder said it seems to be moving east from the downtown core, too.

Another bright spot, Yoder said, is small commercial development along the route.



Construction continues in the area around a future Gold Line station at the intersection of 2nd St. N. and Helmo Ave. in Oakdale. (Alex Kormann/The Minnesota Star Tribune)

Growth potential

Woodbury is one of the metro's fastest growing suburbs, and the Gold Line is expected to bring more development.

The line has three stops in Woodbury, including its eastern terminus, with major development on a 15-acre parcel west of Bielenberg Drive near the Tamarack Station stop south of Interstate 94. That's where a Top Golf is expected to open

this fall, and City Planner Eric Searles said the site for a [Main Event](#) bowling alley and arcade has been graded.

“With Top Golf representatives ... they really liked this site because it had the transit service,” Searles said, noting they see the bus line as a benefit for employees and customers.

The city’s Gold Line [master plan](#) identified Tamarack Station as a key area for transit-oriented development, and although no residential project has surfaced yet, Searles said it’s expected.

The Gold Line’s dedicated roadway along 70% of its route lends it some advantages over other BRT lines in the Twin Cities that run in traffic.

Between its frequency and dedicated lanes, the Gold Line should be thought of as somewhere in between light-rail and traditional bus service in its ability to generate development, said Yingling Fan, a professor of urban and regional planning with the Humphrey School of Public Affairs.

“The more fixed the infrastructure is, the higher the potential of the infrastructure to induce development,” she said, because fixed infrastructure boosts developer confidence.

There’s also more space along the Gold Line to build than along urban BRT lines.

“There is limited available land,” Fan said. “With the available lots, the land price is much higher, and also it involves brownfield development, and development cost is also higher.”