

**Date:** 9/20/2024

**To:** Purple Line project committees, policymakers and community stakeholders

**From:** Craig A. Lamothe, AICP, Purple Line Project Manager *CAL*

## **RE: Purple Line Project Update Memo – Response to 9/9 Maplewood City Council Workshop with Key Points of Clarification**

In light of recent news articles following the September 9<sup>th</sup> Maplewood City Council workshop, the project team felt it was important to share agency partner statements and clarify some of the workshop discussion points to correctly inform future decision making on the project. The workshop touched on a number of alternative approaches to providing transit service in the City and incorrectly characterized aspects and potential impacts of the Purple Line project including:

- Post-pandemic transit usage
- Bus Rapid Transit as a trending mode
- Purple Line BRT Project
- Arterial BRT service
- Metro micro (Metro Transit's new microtransit service)
- Autonomous vehicles

### **Metropolitan Council and Ramsey County Statements**

Purple Line project partners, the Metropolitan Council and Ramsey County, are strongly committed to providing high-capacity transit services to this portion of the region - particularly for those who are dependent on transit – and issued the following statements in response to the September 9<sup>th</sup> Maplewood City Council workshop discussion.

**Metropolitan Council Statement:** “The Purple Line is a strong transit project that would bring significant investments to the east metro, and we are committed to continued engagement with our local partners. We look forward to advancing a regional transit vision that will connect our communities and ensure future prosperity, and we remain steadfast in our vision and commitment to a future with more transportation options for everyone.”

**Ramsey County Statement:** "Ramsey County is dedicated to ensuring the voices of our residents, especially those with limited transit options, are central to advancing transformative transit projects. These projects aim to create strong transit corridors that connect residents and businesses to essential goods, services, healthcare, and employment, while also enhancing safety for pedestrians and bicyclists, addressing aging infrastructure, and fostering thoughtful economic development and revitalization.

The Purple Line is a forward-thinking project designed to meet the evolving mobility needs of the community, positioning Ramsey County and the region for long-term success. In a post-COVID world, the

Purple Line offers fast, convenient, and reliable transit service all day, every day. Importantly, 70% of trips along this corridor are focused outside of downtown St. Paul.

We remain committed to ensuring the voices of Ramsey County residents are heard, and their transportation needs are not overlooked. As a transformative transit initiative, the Purple Line would bring significant investments to the east metro—an area that has not benefited from transit infrastructure at the same level as other parts of our region. We will continue advocating for more equitable transit options that support the future success of our communities."

## **Post-Pandemic Transit Usage**

### **Change in Who is Riding Transit**

Share of trips by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) riders has increased from 42% (2016) to 55% (2022) while only 29% of the regional population is BIPOC. Share of trips by riders earning less than \$25k has increased from 27% (2016) to 33% (2022). Share of trips by riders with 1 or more disabilities has increased from 9% (2016) to 13% (2022).

### **Change in Why People are Riding Transit**

Less people are riding transit for work-commutes. Less than half of trips are for work-commutes, and only 20% are for 9-5 jobs. Commuter and express bus routes are carrying only 2% of rides. More people are riding transit for other trip purposes. Trips for errands/shopping has increased from 8% (2016) to 23% (2022). Trips for college/university has increased from 14% (2016) to 17% (2022).

### **Change in When People are Riding Transit**

Tuesdays and Wednesdays are the busiest, but Saturdays have grown to 73% of the average weekday. Morning and afternoon rush are less peaky and longer with 3pm weekdays being the busiest hour.

### **Fast, Reliable, High Frequency, All-Day Service is Driving Transit Growth**

Ridership, regionally and nationwide, has been steadily growing since the end of the pandemic. Regional ridership increased by 17% to 45.9 million rides in 2022 and by 16% to 53.3 million rides in 2023. The METRO system, currently five BRT lines and two light rail lines, now represent 46% of all rides. Post-pandemic people are seeking bi-directional, seven days a week, all day, high frequency transit service serving all trip purposes. Year to date, ridership growth on four of the BRT lines is 18.8% over 2023 while overall bus and system ridership growth is 8.9% and 8.5%, respectively.

## **Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) as a trending mode**

According to the Federal Transit Administration, today, BRT is the nation's fastest-growing transit mode (317 miles of new BRT lines have opened since 2016). According to a recent American Public Transit Association survey, approximately 75% of BRT lines in the United States have some type of dedicated bus lanes (center or side running). Of the 57 transit projects currently in the federal Capital Investment Grants program, 37 are dedicated bus rapid transit projects.

BRT projects with dedicated bus lanes are more expensive than arterial BRT projects because they tend to include a broader range of roadway and pedestrian improvements not included in arterial BRT projects. Integrating transit, roadway and pedestrian improvements into a single project reduces the local tax burden by leveraging federal transit dollars for non-transit elements and consolidates the number of projects disrupting an area with construction.

Corridor context is important in selecting BRT type. Arterial BRT lines replace existing high ridership local routes experiencing speed and reliability challenges from operating in congested corridors. Highway BRT lines connect regional centers that are near highways. Dedicated BRT lines connect dense employment and population centers with greater flexibility than light rail. Like light rail, dedicated BRT lines are intended to be transformative for the corridor they are in. Also like light rail, as dedicated BRT design and engineering progresses so does [station area planning](#) focused on identifying a community vision for redevelopment and safe access to stations as pedestrians and bicyclists.

## Purple Line BRT Project

### Long History of Planning but Not an Outdated Solution

In 1992, Ramsey County purchased the former freight rail right-of-way and designated it as a regional recreational trail with potential future use as a light rail transit line. Transit planning for the corridor was initiated 26 years ago (1998) to explore a fixed rail improvement. The initial transit corridor was 80 miles long from downtown St. Paul to Hinckley with a focus on heavy and light rail transit modes. By 2014, the corridor had been shortened to 25 miles between downtown St. Paul and Forest Lake with a focus on light rail and bus rapid transit modes. Only by the spring 2017 was there a policy level recommendation for a dedicated bus rapid transit project between downtown St. Paul and downtown White Bear Lake over a light rail transit project. There has been a strong commitment to community outreach and engagement throughout this long history by both Ramsey County and Metropolitan Council.

### Funding Transferability

The estimated \$445 million capital cost for Purple Line is anticipated to be funded by Ramsey County (51%) and through the federal [Capital Investment Grants Program](#) (49%). Those funds are not transferable to fund other forms of transit, including arterial BRT and Metro micro.

### Prioritizing Transit thru a Dedicated Lane

The March 22, 2023, letter from Ramsey County to the City of Maplewood clearly stated “Ramsey County’s support for the reevaluation of White Bear Avenue is contingent upon the use of the existing right-of-way consistent with our All-Abilities Transportation Network which prioritizes pedestrians, bicycles, and transit before automobiles. This dedicated corridor will result in the conversion of one lane in each direction to a dedicated bus lane.” After the letter was read into the record as part of the March 22, 2023, Maplewood hosted Purple Line Engagement Workshop, Maplewood City Councilmembers expressed excitement and optimism.

### Environmental Sustainability

Through a reduction in automobile vehicle miles traveled (1.5 million annually) and replacement of diesel buses (current local routes) with electric buses (Purple Line), the project would improve human health, safety, energy, and environment in the corridor through less emissions of air quality pollutants.

### White Bear Avenue Corridor

Through a survey administered this summer, over 1,300 respondents indicated a strong preference (over 70%) for Purple Line operating in the White Bear Avenue corridor over being collocated with the Bruce Vento Regional Trail. As the basis for their preference, most respondents mentioned preserving the Bruce Vento Regional Trail, north of Maryland, as it is today or to the greater access to essentials and opportunities in the White Bear Avenue corridor.

Purple Line, between Downtown Saint Paul and Maplewood’s North End along the White Bear Avenue Corridor, is estimated to serve over 80,000 jobs and 5,600 people/square mile within a half-mile of project stations. The total population within 1-mile of the Purple Line route is just over 75,000.

The corridor as compared to Ramsey County as a whole:

- About 60% of the population is Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, compared to 40%
- About 20% of the population is below the federal poverty threshold, compared to 13%.
- About 17% of households do not own a vehicle, compared to 10%.
- About 13% of the population has a disability, compared to 12%.

### Driveways

The August 6, 2024, memo “RE: Responses to July 22<sup>nd</sup> Maplewood City Council Workshop Questions” discussed changes to property access resulting from White Bear Avenue design concepts. There appears to be some confusion that these changes would remove all driveway access to businesses. To clarify, there are 52 business driveways along White Bear Avenue in Maplewood today. Left turns are already prohibited at 19 of those 52 driveways; however, traffic can turn right into those properties and can turn right exiting those properties. The Side-Running Bus Lane Concept would create a similar condition at the remaining 33 of the 52 business properties; the Center Running Bus Lane Concept would create that condition at 30 of the remaining 33 driveways. Again, these conditions reflect only a high level of conceptual engineering (1% level of design); access will be considered further as design progresses.

### Traffic

Traffic analysis conducted for the White Bear Avenue design concepts did indicate some increased delay at intersections during the afternoon peak hour. However, the characterization that there would be “bumper to bumper” traffic from City Hall to County Road D is incorrect. The traffic operations analysis for both design concepts indicated typical urban/suburban traffic delays in the afternoon peak hour at all intersections in the Maplewood segment with the exception of the White Bear Avenue/County Road C intersection under the Center Running Bus Lane Concept. Neither concept is expected to result in congested conditions during the remainder of the day. If emergency vehicles encounter congested conditions at any time, they can use the bus lanes, with or without sirens.

### Arterial Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) Lines

Arterial BRT lines are part of the [region’s BRT network](#), which also includes highway BRT lines and dedicated BRT lines. By 2030, a planned 165-mile bus rapid transit network of 12 lines will offer fast, frequent, all-day service to many communities in the region. BRT ridership stayed strong during the pandemic and is recovering faster than other service types, reflecting a rising demand for all-day, all-purpose service.

All forms of BRT provide fast service through off-board fare collection, transit signal priority, and station spacing. In contrast to arterial BRT lines, dedicated BRT lines include other speed enhancing features, such as fewer stations per mile (i.e., stations every ½ mile or greater compared to every ¼ to ½ mile), additional speed and reliability features, such as more bus lanes particularly important during periods of congestion due to special events, traffic incidents, and weather, and speed and convenience enhancing features, such as 10-inch-high platforms for near level boarding with mobility devices (e.g., wheelchairs, walkers, strollers).

## [Metro micro](#)

After a successful 24-month test program in North Minneapolis, Metro Transit is planning, as part of the [Network Now Draft Concept Plan](#), to pilot 8 additional Metro micro zones (up to two new zones annually through the end of 2027). The North Minneapolis micro zone, which is anticipated to be made permanent in October 2024, is approximately **5 square miles** with a **1.25-mile radius** and **anchored to C and D lines**.

Each planned Metro micro zone will be **anchored to an existing or future METRO line** (light rail transit – LRT or bus rapid transit – BRT) and served by **five vehicles** at an estimated cost of **\$1.0 – 1.5 million annually**. The first two new zones to be implemented are in the Roseville and Woodbury areas in late 2024 anchored at Rosedale Transit Center on the A Line and Queens Drive Station on Gold Line, respectively. The Roseville and Woodbury zones are each **approximately 12 square miles with a 2.0-mile radius**. The zones for the other six areas are not yet defined, including one serving parts of Maplewood, Vadnais Heights, White Bear Lake and Mahtomedi, which would be anchored by Maplewood Mall Transit Center on the Purple Line.

During the September 11 Metropolitan Council meeting, there was discussion of the Network Now Concept Plan which includes planned investments across our region in micro transit service. During that discussion, Councilmembers discussed the micro transit project expansion areas included in the draft concept plan and need to prioritize implementation when considering present and future resources. They also reinforced the important role that micro transit will play within our regional transit system, while also recognizing its success is ultimately predicated on the direct connections into and broader expansion of our regional transit network comprised of METRO lines and local bus services. Micro transit is intended to serve as a "last mile" connector service into and from these frequent, all day transit routes that comprise the backbone of a successful regional transit network. It is not being designed as a standalone transit service. Furthermore, the frequent, all-day services are proving to be the most successful parts of our system in the post-pandemic years, with significant opportunities for additional growth in the years ahead as the system expands and provides far more connections across the region. Therefore, if or when implementation plans across the regional transit network change, the Council is likely to simultaneously reevaluate its micro transit priorities and timelines to ensure that every resource is being spent as thoughtfully and as effectively as possible to maximize resident access into frequent, all-day transit services across the Metro Transit network.

## [Autonomous Vehicles](#)

MnDOT has participated in three autonomous shuttle vehicle pilots – White Bear Lake (Bear Tracks), Rochester (Med City Mover) and Grand Rapids, and a fourth in Eden Prairie is sponsored by SouthWest Transit. In all cases, the pilots are not fully automated because they have a person attending the vehicle at all times. These pilots have served limited geographic areas similar in size to Maplewood's North End with 6-10 passenger, low speed (10-12 mph) vehicles. These pilots have identified challenges with operating in winter driving conditions and low speeds have frustrated other drivers, prompting some potentially dangerous driving behaviors. Fully autonomous vehicles are not generally anticipated until 2035 at the earliest when programming and infrastructure can better support fully autonomous vehicles.