

Orange Line plans ready for comment

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In Bloomington, development near the Orange Line's American Boulevard station is already underway. The Genesee Apartments (above) opened in 2012, and the second phase of that project will house a hotel, restaurant and grocery store at the southeast corner of Penn Avenue and 80th Street. (Staff photo: Bill Klotz)

The Metropolitan Council on Wednesday started the public comment period on its latest [plans](#) for the 16-mile Orange Line bus rapid transit project.

The \$150 million Orange Line, which would run from Minneapolis to Burnsville along Interstate 35W, is expected to bring more than a bus route to the interstate corridor. Metro Transit is working with the cities along the route, Hennepin and Dakota counties, and the Minnesota Department of Transportation to move forward on the Orange Line while making large infrastructure improvements to station areas, access ramps on Lake Street, the I-35W and I-494 interchange in Bloomington, and aging bridges.



The BRT route also will use recently completed transit-related projects along the corridor including the Marq2 lanes for express buses in downtown Minneapolis, the 46th Street station in the center of I-35W, which opened in 2010, and the existing South Bloomington Transit Center.

After the public comment period on the Orange Line plans ends May 30, Metro Transit and the Metropolitan Council will consider feedback and the plan will be brought to the Metropolitan Council for review and adoption.

At a cost of less than \$10 million per mile, the BRT route is designed to mimic the speed, frequency and reliability of light rail transit but without the capital costs, said Charles Carlson, director of the BRT/Small Starts Project Office for Metro Transit.

While the estimated cost for the transit project is \$150.7 million, the cost of additional improvements to the roadways, ramps and bridges could be much greater. More than \$150 million in improvements are planned for Lake Street alone, including the transit portion to build the station and a transit bridge and to pave dedicated lanes for about \$50 million, Carlson said.

About 50 percent of the BRT project is slated to be paid for with a federal Small Starts grant, which project staffers will begin the application process for later this year. The second largest share, about 30 percent, would come from the Counties Transit Improvement Board, which collects a quarter-cent sales tax in the counties of Hennepin, Ramsey, Dakota, Washington and Anoka for transit projects.

Gov. Mark Dayton's bonding request outlines \$7 million for design and right-of-way purchases at the Orange Line's Lake Street station site in Minneapolis. Metro Transit is anticipating a combination of state, county and Metropolitan Council funds to cover the rest of the project.

Construction is scheduled to begin in 2016 after funding is secured and final engineering is complete with an anticipated opening date of late 2019 for service.

The freeway-level transit station at Lake Street is a “centerpiece of the Orange Line,” Carlson said.

The two-level station in the center of the freeway would make it easier for 80 to 90 buses per hour to serve that stop. Congestion makes it difficult for buses to move to the existing stations on the outside shoulder.

At the freeway level, BRT and express buses would pull in quickly to the boarding platform for passengers. Below at the Lake Street level, riders can connect to other bus service. The station would also be accessible to passengers with disabilities. Right now, staircases on Second Avenue and Stevens Avenue serve the Lake Street station and they are “in pretty rough shape,” Carlson said.

The combined transit and access improvements at Lake Street will open the corridor up to the employers at that intersection. The Wells Fargo Home Mortgage campus, Abbott Northwestern Hospital and the Children’s Hospitals and Clinics of Minnesota are near the station’s west side. An [exit](#) to Lake Street for southbound I-35 travelers doesn’t exist today.

“We need integration at Lake Street,” Carlson said. “They’ve been left out of participation in the regional system.”

As a whole, the line will open up employers in the south suburbs to downtown Minneapolis and vice versa, he said. There are 162,000 jobs along the Orange Line route, according to the planning documents.

While the BRT route won’t be active until late 2019, Bloomington is already redeveloping the area near its American Boulevard station and expects private development to follow its lead.

The city has strategized to “create a cohesive district” in the area south of I-494 where Penn Avenue and American Boulevard meet — and transit is a major player, said Glen Markegard, planning manager for Bloomington.

Behind the Mall of America, the Penn-American district is Bloomington’s second most popular transit area, Markegard said. He said the forthcoming Orange Line and a proposed east-to-west BRT route along American Boulevard have piqued developer interest and there’s “strong market interest in additional multifamily housing in that area.”

The city and the Bloomington Housing and Redevelopment Authority partnered with Bloomington-based United Properties and StuartCo to develop the 234-unit [Genesee](#) complex in the district at 8055 Penn Ave., which opened in 2012. It features three buildings and 13,000 square feet of retail.

United Properties is also developing the [second phase](#) of the project north of the Genesee, which calls for a 108-room extended stay hotel, a restaurant and up to 9,000 of restaurant and retail space in one building, and a separate 28,600 square-foot grocery store.

“There’s increasing interest in the [suburban] market for a more urban living experience,” Markegard said. “Being close to transit, amenities and services — there are segments of the market that are very interested in that.”

That formula is playing out well for other suburbs along the state’s only operational bus rapid transit route — the 16-mile Red Line route linking the Mall of America to Apple Valley via Highway 77.

In Eagan, the Red Line coming to the Cedar Grove Transit Station was a major factor for the developers behind the Paragon Outlet Partners’ upscale [outlet mall](#), opening this August, and Stonebridge Communities’ 190-unit apartment complex called Flats at Cedar Grove, said Jon Hohenstein, the city’s community development director.

Going forward, it will be a “chicken and egg” scenario, Hohenstein said, to determine what brings development to the area — the outlet center or the transit station. Eagan’s Economic Development Authority has 15 acres spread among four or five parcels in the area that could be sold for development and there’s additional private property across Highway 13.

Hohenstein said bus rapid transit opens up less traditional patterns of development for the city.

“We know this is not going to be a truly urban development area, but it’s less suburban than would be the case in other parts of the city,” he said.

In Apple Valley, where there are three Red Line stops, community development director Bruce Nordquist said just being able to present a completed corridor to developers has been attractive now that construction is complete. He said there has been about \$7 million to \$8 million in new development along the line.

“Oftentimes, if you build it they will come ... and they will do so because having transit for employees and residents is an asset to the community,” he said.

Nordquist said there also has been a lot of reinvestment from existing businesses along the line. He pointed to the Perkins Restaurant, on the southwest corner of 150th Street and Cedar Avenue, and Old Chicago, kitty-corner from Perkins, because both restaurants updated their facilities.

“It isn’t just about new development, but reinvention,” he said.