

SOUTH METRO

# Bus rapid transit projects move forward in the Twin Cities

Orange Line is among about a dozen projects in the works.

By Janet Moore (<http://www.startribune.com/janet-moore/10645476/>) Star Tribune |

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A Metro Transit bus pulled up to the 46th Street station in Minneapolis during rush hour one recent morning, and its inhabitants peered at traffic on Interstate 35W inching forward ever-so-slowly toward the heart of the city.

The bus tour organized by the Metropolitan Council was a way of showing how the proposed \$150 million Orange Line bus rapid transit project will help alleviate epic traffic on one of the state's busiest transportation corridors. The 17-mile line would link Burnsville to downtown Minneapolis — initially serving some 14,000 commuters a day, and more than 26,000 by 2040.

Slated to open in 2019, the Orange Line would be the fourth BRT project planned in the metro area by the Metropolitan Council in recent years, though nearly a dozen others are in the works. Less expensive and less divisive than light-rail, bus rapid transit is poised to become a more notable force in the Twin Cities commuter network.

So far only one such line is operating. The Red Line, which connects the Mall of America to Apple Valley, opened in 2013. The Snelling Avenue A Line in St. Paul is expected to begin service next year.

The Met Council will make a big push to help fund the Orange and Gold lines, both BRT lines, in the next legislative session. The \$485 million Gold Line (or Gateway Corridor) would connect Union Depot in St. Paul to Woodbury, just north of Interstate 94, in 2021.

Both would be funded by state, county and federal sources, and it appears that the funding debate will likely be less acrimonious than those surrounding light rail.

“Some people are a little more supportive of bus transit than light rail due to its cost,” said Adam Duinick, chair of the Met Council. “I think this session we will get good bipartisan support [for the Gold Line], and we have strong support along the I-35W corridor.”

Mary Liz Holberg, a former legislator and now a Republican member of the Dakota County Board, is a well-known foe of light rail. Her main problem with the Orange Line is that it doesn't stretch far enough — namely to Lakeville.

“I'm really dismayed that there's nothing in phase one [of the Orange Line] connecting Lakeville to Minneapolis,” she said. “We really don't want to figure that out later.” She also has questions about the line's connectivity to other suburban bus routes, but is largely supportive of the project.

## A bus more like a train

Generally speaking, BRT is “a combination of service and facility improvements that lead to a faster ride with greater comfort,” said Charles Carlson, Metro Transit's senior manager for BRT. Put simply, it's a bus that's more like a train.

There are different levels of BRT — those that operate on a busway dedicated exclusively to bus service; those like the Orange Line that run on a dedicated lane on an existing highway; and arterial lines, such as the Snelling Avenue project, that share the road with everyone else.

Generally, they have sleeker-looking buses that mimic light-rail trains. Payment is made in advance, stations are more elaborate than regular bus stops, and service is provided more frequently. The Orange Line, for example, is expected to run every 10 minutes at peak times, and every 15 minutes midday and on weekends. The ride would be 55 percent faster than Metro Transit's current 535 express bus that runs along the same route.



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Bus rapid transit has grown by 383 percent in the past decade, according to the Institute for Transportation & Development Policy, a New York-based interest group. But much of the growth has occurred outside the U.S., primarily in China and Brazil.

### **Slow start in U.S.**

In the U.S., BRT growth has come at a slower pace, but the lower cost may make the lines a more attractive alternative for cities and local governments facing growing traffic congestion and constrained budgets. BRT capital costs generally are 30 to 60 percent of the cost of light rail, the group claims.

However, BRT may have a bit of an image problem, due largely to resemblance to traditional bus systems.

“There’s some really horrible bus service out there, people have that image of regular buses,” said Dennis Hinebaugh, director of the National BRT Institute in Tampa, Fla. “Light rail is generally newer so it looks nicer.”

Another challenge for BRT is that bus service can shift due to route and budget cuts, while light rail gives a sense of permanence. Municipal officials and real estate developers, he said, “want to know the rapid transit system is going to be there, especially if they made the investment in the service with vehicles, stations and technology. The people who choose to live near there and developers who choose to build along that corridor want to know that it’s going to be there forever.”

But American support is building. While the Federal Transit Administration has funded just 19 bus rapid transit systems across the country since 1976, there are 27 BRT projects in the pipeline for FTA’s Capital Investment Grant Program. The Orange Line is on the list.

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janet.moore@startribune.com

612-673-7752