



Network**NOW**

ESTABLISHING THE FOUNDATION

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INTRODUCTION

What is Network Now?

[Network Now](#) establishes Metro Transit’s priorities over the next four years. This plan will recognize the changes to the region’s transit network that have occurred since 2019, builds on the success of regional transitways and BRT networks and guides how Metro Transit will invest in service from 2024 to 2027.

Project Phases and Milestones

Network Now includes three major phases extending from early 2023 to mid-2024. Each step is designed to integrate community feedback into Metro Transit’s planning process, with the goal of developing a plan that is driven by values, informed by data, and consistent with regional and local priorities.

The first phase of the project was to engage Metro Transit riders and community members on their values and priorities. Along with this feedback, Metro Transit also reviewed regional policy guidance and assessed recent network performance to understand how existing services meet customers’ needs. Combined, these inputs informed the development of a decision-making framework, including five Network Now Principles that will guide the remainder of the project.

Next, Metro Transit will prioritize the sometimes-competing concepts identified in the Network Now Principles. The decision-making framework will be refined to include evaluation criteria that reflect significance to riders and operational performance. Metro Transit will consider tradeoffs and explain how evaluation criteria can influence planning outcomes .

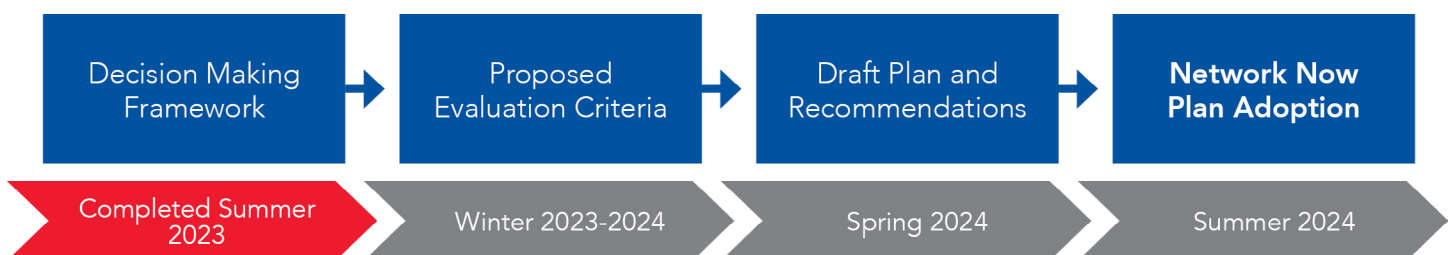
Finally, Metro Transit will develop draft future route network recommendations and address the status of routes that are currently suspended. The agency will then seek public feedback on that plan before making a final recommendation. The final plan will be adopted in summer 2024.

Phase One Goals and Outcomes

This report documents the results of the first phase of the Network Now project. For this initial period, Metro Transit’s goals were to:

- Document the service changes that have been made since 2020
- Explore changes in travel behavior due to the pandemic response and other societal changes
- Review existing ridership data
- Explore policy guidance
- Review rider, local partner, and employee feedback
 - Engage at least 2,500 people in a regional conversation on values
 - Hear feedback from riders across all of Metro Transit’s service area, including from low-income and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities

All of these goals were achieved during Phase One, providing Metro Transit with a foundation for future project decision-making that reflects the public’s priorities and the realities of transit operations in today’s transportation landscape.



DEVELOPING THE DECISION-MAKING FRAMEWORK

Metro Transit's Network Now decision-making framework is informed by three sources of information on current transit needs, priorities, and performance. These include the following:

- **Policy Guidance:** Metro Transit's services are governed by regional policy documents adopted by the Metropolitan Council, as well as more detailed supporting standards and guidelines. Key documents are summarized in the Policy Guidance section below, and additional detail is available in the separate Policy Guidance chapter.
- **Network Performance and Opportunities:** Metro Transit's evaluation of recent transit service performance and opportunities for improvement are summarized in the Network Performance and Opportunities section below and are further explored in the separate Network Performance and Opportunities chapter.
- **Engagement and Customer Feedback:** Metro Transit conducted extensive public outreach activities as part of Phase One and the development of the Network Now decision-making framework. Results of these engagement efforts are summarized in the Engagement and Customer Feedback section below; more information can be found in the separate Engagement and Customer Feedback chapter and online appendix.

Key findings from each topic area are described below. Further detail can be found on all topics on Metro Transit's Network Now webpage, available at <https://www.metrotransit.org/network-now>.

Policy Guidance

Metro Transit is guided by regional policy when making decisions related to service planning. Policy is documented in a variety of sources, including regional policy documents developed by the Metropolitan Council and procedures and best practices developed by transit agency staff. Thrive MSP 2040¹ is the primary policy document for all Council functions, and the Transportation Policy Plan (TPP)² is the main transportation system document. The Metropolitan Council is currently

1 Thrive MSP 2040 is available at <https://metrocouncil.org/Planning/Thrive-2040.aspx>.

2 Transportation Policy Plan is available at <https://metrocouncil.org/Transportation/Planning-2/Key-Transportation-Planning-Documents/Transportation-Policy-Plan.aspx>.

3 A full list of service changes completed since 2019 is available on the Network Now Planning page here: <https://www.metrotransit.org/network-now-planning>.

developing the 2050 TPP which will be considered for adoption in late 2024. Metro Transit is following updates to the 2050 TPP while developing Network Now.

The TPP divides the Twin Cities region into Transit Market Areas that help guide a standard level and type of transit service that are appropriate for different subareas in the region based on land use patterns, population and job densities, and auto availability. Service standards define minimum levels of frequency (the number of bus trips per hour) and span (the number of hours each route operates in a day) for different types of transit service. These standards emphasize the importance of higher service levels for METRO lines and core local routes, which carry most of Metro Transit's bus ridership.

In addition, Council policy establishes minimum levels of ridership (number of bus riders per day or year) and productivity (number of bus riders per in-service hour) for transit service so that resources are used responsibly. Additional policy guidance informs transit service and investments towards projects that advance equity and reduce regional disparities.

Network Performance and Opportunities

Metro Transit's historical ridership and performance data informs service planning decisions by highlighting areas of need and opportunities for future investment. Analysis conducted in this phase began with documentation of recent service changes³ and customer demographics, both of which provide context for the evaluation of ridership and performance measures across Metro Transit's entire bus system (arterial BRT, highway BRT, commuter express, and local bus). Performance metrics include ridership, productivity, cost effectiveness, reliability and on-time performance, access to transit, and access to jobs. Key conclusions from this data are described in the following sections.

Service Changes

Metro Transit reduced service by nearly 30% between March 2020 and March 2023, though service changes were experienced unevenly through the three year period. In 2020 at the beginning of the pandemic Metro Transit made service reductions throughout the bus network. As time progressed the agency reinstated most service in the core cities but not in many suburban areas.

Service changes were also accompanied by facility use adjustments. Park & ride use has declined since 2019 and has been slower to return to pre-pandemic levels than other types of transit stops. In the Fall 2022 parking survey, a total of 1,822 parked cars were observed at Metro Transit park & rides, which is 15% of the 11,809 parked cars observed in 2019. Throughout the pandemic and subsequent workforce-related service reductions, Metro Transit has prioritized commuter express service at 1-2 park & ride facilities in each highway corridor instead of serving multiple smaller sites. This allows for more frequent service to a smaller number of total locations, with the understanding that some customers may need to drive further to reach their destination.

Metro Transit's rush-hour service periods have become less pronounced since the pandemic, with traditional commuter service recovering more slowly than mid-day, evening, and weekend trips.

Customer Demographics

Metro Transit customers tend to be more diverse, younger, and lower-income than the region as a whole. Metro Transit riders include a higher share of BIPOC individuals than the overall regional population. In addition 52% of Metro Transit customers are between the ages of 18 and 34, compared to 25% of Metro Transit's service area population. Household incomes are lower among Metro Transit customers than among Metro Transit's service area population, with 43% of riders having annual household incomes below \$35,000, compared with 20% of service area households. Customers also tend to be regular transit users, with over 70% of Metro Transit customers reporting using the system every day or most days of the week.

Ridership

Most bus ridership is concentrated in dense, walkable urban areas. Approximately 93% of boardings occur in pedestrian-friendly areas of high to moderately high

population and employment densities typical of Transit Market Areas I and II. However, changing travel patterns due to telecommuting, lower parking costs and increased parking availability have resulted in the system's greatest ridership losses by percentage occurring in downtown express bus markets. Most bus trips are now for purposes other than commuting for jobs during traditional business hours. Prior to 2020, commute trips made up 34% of trips on the network; they now account for only 20% of trips.

Ridership is concentrated on core local routes (including LRT and BRT), which connect to major destinations like downtown Minneapolis, downtown Saint Paul, and the University of Minnesota. Ridership on core local routes has risen as a proportion of the regional total and now represents 74% of total bus ridership, compared to 4% of ridership on commuter and express routes. Rides on supporting local and suburban local routes, which operate in lower-density areas, together make up the remaining 21% of total weekday ridership. Average daily ridership on Saturdays and Sundays is lower than on weekdays although this difference is narrowing. Ridership on arterial BRT services, such as the METRO A, C, and D Lines has been the most resilient and experienced the smallest decline. Overall, 70% of total regional bus ridership is on the top 16 highest-ridership routes.

Performance

Productivity

Productivity, the number of passengers riding per hour each bus is in service, has been declining across the bus network except on arterial BRT. While down from pre-pandemic levels, productivity on both arterial BRT and highway BRT has increased since the onset of the pandemic, in part due to the introduction of the METRO Orange Line in 2021 and D Line in 2022. Local and commuter express routes have experienced the most significant productivity declines.

Cost Effectiveness

Cost-effectiveness is measured using subsidy per passenger, defined as the difference between the cost to transport one passenger and the fare revenue for that passenger. High-ridership routes in the core tend to be the most cost-effective services, meaning that more rides are provided per dollar of public investment. Revenue on all types of transit service has declined significantly since 2019.

Operational Performance

Through customer comments and conversations during engagement opportunities, Metro Transit customers consistently report that speed, reliability, and safety are very important to their satisfaction and continued use of transit. Challenges in these areas can lead to declining ridership.

Data indicates that reliability (on-time performance) has been declining, with core local routes experiencing the greatest impact. The most severe reliability issue, unscheduled trip cancellations, disproportionately affects communities of color in part because there is more service provided in those communities.

Access to Transit

Access to transit is defined by the number of people who live near transit service, measured by examining areas within walking or rolling distance of transit stops or stations. Approximately 35% of the region's residents live within a 5-minute walk or roll of some level of all-day transit service and fewer people live within walking or rolling distance of frequent transit service. Many suburban residents are within a 10-minute drive of park-and-ride commuter express service.

Access to Jobs and Opportunities

Access can determine when and where riders use transit. Since 2019 access to jobs has decreased with reductions in service, though these changes in accessibility have been driven primarily by lower frequencies on high-frequency bus routes and the METRO Blue Line and Green Line LRT. These patterns indicate that access to jobs can improve with investments in frequency.

Engagement and Customer Feedback

In addition to policy guidance and performance data, Metro Transit's service planning relies on a comprehensive set of data from public feedback. Public input was gathered through multiple methods including conversations on transit or at transit centers, stakeholder meetings, a public survey, and customer relations records. From these data, the following themes and takeaways emerged:

Reliability

Reliability was a top cited concern across all engagement methods. An increase in reliability was viewed

more favorably in a trade-off with increased frequency. Additionally, many customer service records cited trips running late as a significant concern, leading to individuals missing transfers or being late to school, work, or appointments.

Ridership

At outreach events and on the survey, participants prioritized transit that serves many riders. At the Spring 2023 workshops, participants focused on a routes' ridership, above other route information when deciding to cut or add trips. Survey respondents also indicated that serving the most riders was their top value when deciding how to best distribute transit service.

Expanded Geographic Access and Coverage

Increasing coverage was a common request, (20% of customer relations comments) specifically where service has been suspended on specific routes. However, survey respondents generally supported service geared toward areas where demand and ridership were high over covering a greater service area.

Frequency and Span of Service

Many riders mentioned wanting more frequency of buses, particularly on LRT and BRT lines and in wintertime. This was most often coupled with requests for more service at night and on weekends; however, when confronted with a trade-off between frequency and span of service in the survey, more respondents answered in favor of increased frequency.

Equity

For survey respondents, providing good service in neighborhoods with BIPOC or low-income communities was one of their top values. Equity was also preferred in a trade-off with providing equal levels of service across the service area.

NETWORK NOW PRINCIPLES

Building on the information gained in the Phase One research and engagement process, Metro Transit has established five Network Now Principles to guide future planning efforts. These principles identify key priorities that Metro Transit must balance to achieve successful outcomes as defined by regional policy, service performance metrics, and customer and stakeholder feedback.

The five Network Now Principles reflect key needs and values of the transit system and its users. These principles are listed in random order as follows:

- Adapt service to changes in transit markets and travel patterns.
- Prepare for new METRO and high-frequency routes.
- Maintain the reliability of scheduled service consistently over time.
- Build on success to grow ridership, adding service where people use transit the most.
- Provide access to opportunities and services with a focus on advancing equity and reducing regional disparities.

As the project progresses into Phase Two, the Network Now Principles will directly influence the development of evaluation criteria to assess the performance of various service improvement options. Policymakers will incorporate community values when weighting the principles. In this way, the Network Now Principles will connect community values to the actual decision-making to prioritize future service improvements.

Each of the five Network Now Principles is further described in the sections below.

Adapt service to changes in transit markets and travel patterns.

Travel patterns and transit demand were changing even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and have accelerated since early 2020. Metro Transit has adapted and must continue to adapt to changes in circumstances and travel by evaluating park-and-ride alternatives and service types such as microtransit. Additionally, rather than continuing to focus primarily on work trips, incorporating knowledge of travel behavior changes into service offerings, with considerations for

telecommuting, students, and multi-purpose trips, is a sustainable way to adapt. Understanding these changes helps Metro Transit optimize the use of limited resources to effectively provide service to today's transit market.

Prepare for new METRO and high-frequency routes.

Metro Transit is planning to open four Arterial BRT lines, one Highway BRT line and a light rail extension by the end of 2027. To prepare for new METRO and high-frequency routes it is advantageous to increase the population within walking distance of these networks, consider the role and need for underlying local service, and plan for connections between regional and local transit. Metro Transit's commitments to BRT and LRT require coordination with local routes so riders can effectively make connections between the two. METRO and other high-frequency service can work in tandem with local service to support communities, with the understanding that METRO and high-frequency service alone do not always sustain the areas they serve.

Maintain the reliability of scheduled service consistently over time.

The reliability of scheduled service is critical to the success of a transit route or network, so it is important to address lateness, improve average speed and minimize unscheduled trip cancellations. It is difficult to have a lifestyle that includes transit when schedules frequently change significantly. Over many years, including during Network Now engagement, Metro Transit has received consistent feedback that reliability is important for maintaining customers' desire to use transit and ensuring that the customer experience meets expectations. Unscheduled trip cancellations, which disproportionately impact communities of color because that is where the majority of the region's service is deployed, must be minimized to ensure system reliability. Initiatives to improve average speed and reliability make transit more attractive and useful by improving transfer connections, avoiding congestion bottlenecks and reducing travel time to more closely match driving.

Bus and train operators have shared that allocating sufficient recovery time is a key quality-of-life issue. Recovery time allows drivers to catch up if they are be-

hind schedule, take necessary breaks, and still start the next trip on time. Since schedule reliability impacts both customers and drivers, adequate recovery time can help address both rider and employee satisfaction with transit.

Build on success to grow ridership by adding service where people use transit the most.

Improving frequency and/or the span of service where ridership and productivity are already highest are proven ways to continue to grow ridership. Focusing resources on existing markets can help Metro Transit ensure that service meets current demand. At the same time, planning incrementally for growth in emerging markets, beginning with basic service, allows for service to be expanded or improved as demand grows. Transit-supportive land uses, such as dense residential and commercial areas with limited parking, are most likely to generate additional transit demand and should be viewed as opportunities for adding service.

Provide access to opportunities and services with a focus on advancing equity and reducing regional disparities.

In addition to focusing resources where ridership is already highest, another way to prioritize advancing equity goals is by increasing access to key destinations for underserved populations. It is important to allocate some resources to routes that may not currently have the highest ridership but may provide life-line access to opportunities and services for those with few good alternatives. Improving access to key destinations including grocery stores, pharmacies, shopping centers, libraries, schools, daycares, and medical and social services can aid in the reduction of regional disparities. These improvements increase accessibility for those who live in areas where there are not transit alternatives. For example, residents in suburban areas can access community assets, and residents of urban areas can access opportunities in suburbs. New on-demand service options, such as the Metro Transit micro pilot project in North Minneapolis, can help provide transit access in a more flexible way.

NEXT STEPS

This document concludes the first phase of the Network Now project. Moving forward, Metro Transit will engage partners on potential network changes based on evaluation criteria, recommend potential improvements, and ultimately refine and adopt a final plan that reflects the region's priorities for transit. For more information on Network Now and upcoming engagement opportunities, visit the Network Now webpage (<https://www.metrotransit.org/network-now>), subscribe for [project updates](#), or contact Metro Transit staff at NetworkNow@metrotransit.org.

