

Executive Summary

The Regional Transit Challenge

In 1998, the Metropolitan Council and Metro Transit embarked on a program to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of transit service. The metro area was divided into nine geographic sectors for the purpose of comprehensively evaluating transit service and needs, determining market opportunities and restructuring service and facilities to better address those needs and opportunities. To date, transit service restructuring studies have been completed and implemented with successful results in Sectors 1, 2 and 7. For example, ridership in Sector 2 (northeast quadrant of St. Paul) grew by 6 percent comparing statistics from 2001 and 2002.

The Sector 5 Final Plan presented here restructures transit service in south Minneapolis, Bloomington, Edina, Richfield and in an area of St. Paul south of I-94 and west of downtown. Implementation will occur in three phases starting in April 2004 and will be completed in December 2004. Sector 5, also known as Central-South, includes several major transportation corridors: Hiawatha, I-35W South and I-494. The new Hiawatha light-rail transit (LRT) line, scheduled to begin service in April 2004 with completion in the December of 2004, is entirely within Sector 5. The 55 routes operating in Sector 5 today generate more than 50 percent of Metro Transit rides (36.4 million in 2001) while using just 40 percent of Metro Transit service hours. Some 500,000 residents and 500,000 jobs are located in Sector 5.

Current bus operations and ridership are outlined in detail in a Sector 5 Existing Conditions Report. This report documents ridership collected at every bus stop in Central-South. It depicts a transit system successfully serving a densely developed core urban area, and outlines opportunities for transit in suburban corridors that have developed strong employment and residential concentrations.

Current service is characterized by:

- Good coverage
- Complexity of some routes
- Park-and-ride lots too small to grow ridership and improve efficiency
- Bus stop spacing too close on many routes, slowing bus operations
- Opportunities to improve frequency and span of service in strong markets

Hard Choices: The Stakeholder Process

Transit faces a difficult tradeoff between pursuing ridership and minimizing subsidy per passenger (called the Productivity goal) and serving people who desire transit wherever they are, regardless of cost (the Coverage goal). These goals imply different service design, and the choice between them is largely a value judgment.

As part of evaluating existing service and gathering community input, Metro Transit convened stakeholders – from transit customers and community groups to elected officials – in several meetings throughout the study area. The purpose of the community outreach in early 2002 was to ask stakeholders to prioritize the value of competing transit service objectives. Feedback suggested that the productivity and efficiency of transit service in Sector 5 were highly valued and this guided the development of the plan. This process continued in early 2003 with six public meetings and a public hearing to receive comments on the Concept Plan.

The major themes voiced by stakeholders to improve the productivity of service include:

- Faster service in major corridors such as Lake Street, I-35W and West 7th Street
- Improved span of service, especially on weekends
- Improved/added cross-town bus service in cities and suburbs
- Faster service between Minneapolis and the airport
- Simpler route structures
- Added service in the I-494 market, via crosstown and reverse-commute transit

Key objectives

The key objectives of the plan were developed in concert with those identified by stakeholders. While Metro Transit's operating budget was reduced in 2003, this plan meets those objectives within the amended annual operating budget. The addition of a Federal Congestion Mitigation Air Quality (CMAQ) grant of \$14 million will allow about a 7 percent increase in service for approximately three years. The key objectives are:

- Optimize effectiveness and efficiency to improve productivity
- Provide faster and more frequent service to major destinations and along major corridors such as Lake Street, I-35W, West 7th Street, I-494 and Hiawatha
- Reallocate transit resources to better fit local development and transit markets
- Improve connections between routes and neighborhoods
- Integrate plans for new facilities and services such as Hiawatha LRT, I-494 and I-35W stations

Plan Strategies

Strategies employed in the plan to meet the key objectives are:

- Improve operating speed - Attractiveness and efficiency of Metro Transit service will increase with improved operating speeds. Tactics include:

- Bus stop spacing - aggressive implementation of bus stop spacing policy of eight stops per mile (one stop every long block or one stop every two short blocks).
- Fare collection - The current fare collection system takes a significant amount of time and will be dramatically improved with the planned implementation of the Go-To card in 2004.
- Additional transit advantages like bus-only shoulders, HOV and bus lanes on highways.
- Improve service frequency & span of service - Given a choice people prefer more frequent service within reasonable access distances. Build upon successes and introduce more service where market potential warrants.
- Simplify the route structure - Simplifying routes will make them more attractive to current and new customers.
- Add new faster service in strong corridors and to major destinations - All-day limited-stop service on I-35W South and on I-494, new limited-stop service on Lake Street/Marshall Avenue and West 7th Street, new light-rail transit service along Hiawatha. Support these new limited-stop services with connections to intersecting local routes.
- Anchor high frequency, all-day, commuter express routes at large (300-500 car) park-and-ride lots, rather than several small lots with few bus trips.

Public Comments

This final plan reflects customer and other stakeholder feedback. Seven public meetings were held in late January and early February 2003. More than 4,200 comments were received from more than 3,000 individuals.

Plan Impacts

A principal objective of the plan is to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of transit service in delivering mobility to residents and visitors of the metro area.

The Metro Transit team worked extensively to refine the proposed plan to minimize negative impact on current customers. While still maintaining good coverage, this final plan simplifies the route structure and reinvests resources into areas or at times where additional service is warranted. Less than 1/10th of one percent of current riders will be beyond a ¼ mile walk from the planned route network.

Implementation Schedule

In April 2004, bus routes in St. Paul and Minneapolis will change to coordinate with the Route 55 Hiawatha LRT line beginning operations between downtown Minneapolis and Fort Snelling. Minnesota Valley Transit Authority (MVTA) will operate a bus line between Eagan and 46th Street Station.

In September 2004, bus routes in Minneapolis, Bloomington, Edina, and Richfield will change to coordinate with Route 535 I-35W limited-stop service and the new Routes 588 and 589 Highway

100 commuter express service. An improved Route 594 connecting Eden Prairie with Route 535 I-35W limited-stop service at Best Buy Transit Center in Richfield will be operated by Southwest Metro Transit.

In December 2004, two bus routes will be changed to coordinate with the extension of the Route 55 Hiawatha LRT line to Mall of America via the airport.

Several additional services have been identified for future consideration. These are lower priority, yet worthwhile improvements that cannot be implemented within the current budget.