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Ecolab's Doug Baker throws support behind Uptown-to-downtown St. Paul rapid-transit line

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The CEO of St. Paul-based Ecolab Inc. joined with Mayor Melvin Carter and other city leaders on Tuesday to rally support for bringing Metro Transit's planned B Line bus rapid transit service all the way downtown.

The \$54 million B Line would speed up transit trips between Uptown Minneapolis and St. Paul, but the current budget only carries it as far as the intersection of Snelling and University avenues. Metro Transit announced earlier this year it would consider an extension to downtown St. Paul, and the prominent members of the city's business community are eager to see it happen.

About 1,800 employees work at Ecolab's downtown St. Paul headquarters, and CEO Doug Baker said transit is a "hugely important" factor in attracting and retaining those workers. Baker described the B Line as a smart investment that could make transit a much more convenient option for St. Paul commuters — particularly if it can offer transfer-free commutes into downtown.

Baker said car-free and car-light lifestyles are trending with younger workers. Others might choose transit over a car "if you change the convenience factor," he said. "Our employees want options."

Representatives of the Saint Paul Downtown Alliance, Saint Paul Area Chamber of Commerce and East Metro Strong, a public-private partnership advocating for transit in the east metro, joined Baker and Carter to make the case for the B Line extension.

Saint Paul Downtown Alliance President Joe Spencer noted the city's downtown residential population almost doubled to 9,500 from 4,900 in just eight years, and he said there's room to double that population again — with the support of transit infrastructure like the B Line.

The B Line would at first supplement local bus service on Route 21 and could eventually replace it entirely. Running between Uptown Minneapolis and downtown St. Paul on Lake Street and Marshall Avenue, the 21 is the second-busiest bus route in the Twin Cities, logging over 100,000 rides on a typical weekday, according to Metro Transit.

It's an efficient people-mover, but it's slow.

Route 21 buses account for just one-fiftieth of the motor vehicle traffic on Lake Street while moving one-fifth of the



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Ecolab CEO Doug Baker said the B Line could make it easier for employees to commute via transit to the company's downtown headquarters. Employees are increasingly seeing transit access as a perk, he added.

people traveling by vehicle. But they're often crawling, averaging just 8 mph during rush hour.

Metro Transit says bus rapid transit could be up to 20 percent faster than regular bus service in what's known as the Midtown Corridor. It achieves those time savings by serving fewer stops spaced farther apart and by requiring payment at a transit station before boarding.

The possible extension of the B Line route would follow Selby Avenue east of Lexington Avenue. But how the bus gets from Snelling and University down to Selby is still an open question.

To bolster the case for the Selby extension, Will Schroeer, executive director of East Metro Strong, put some St. Paul city officials in a van with reporters and led a tour of potential B Line routes, pointing out construction along the way. That included 34 units of new housing and 9,000 square feet of commercial space in two new buildings under construction at the Victoria Street intersection and about 100 units of senior housing planned near the Dale Street intersection.

"There's a lot going on in the Selby corridor," said Russ Stark, St. Paul's chief resilience officer, who was on the tour. He described Cathedral Hill neighborhood and parts west along Selby as some of the densest and most walkable areas of St. Paul.

St. Paul Mayor Melvin Carter said the success of the A Line, which opened in 2016, demonstrates the potential of bus rapid transit.

The A Line runs between the 46th Street Station in South Minneapolis and the Rosedale Transit Center on a route that traverses Ford Parkway and Snelling Avenue. Ridership is up about 30 percent on that corridor compared to when it was just served by the Route 84, Carter said.

"We know that transit works and impacts our community for the better," he said.

Construction on the B Line would begin in 2022 at the earliest. Station designs will be developed in 2020 and 2021, according to a Metro Transit timeline.

Metro Transit is hosting a series of B Line open house events. The next is scheduled for 4 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. May 22 at Walker Library, 2880 Hennepin Ave. S.

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