

NEWS

Metro Transit's new B Line will extend to downtown St. Paul, a victory for transit advocates



A Metro Transit A Line rapid transit bus pulls up to the Snelling and Minnehaha station. The B Line, expected to start in 2023, will run from Uptown Minneapolis to Downtown St. Paul. (Jaime DeLage / Pioneer Press)

By **FREDERICK MELO** | fmelo@pioneerpress.com |

Pioneer Press

January 2, 2020 at 5:05 a.m.

When Metro Transit's "B" Line bus rolls over the Lake Street-Marshall Avenue bridge from Minneapolis into St. Paul, Snelling Avenue won't be a terminus.

The Midway will be, appropriately enough, just a midway-point for the limited-stop “arterial” Bus Rapid Transit service, which will travel over to Selby Avenue and then into downtown St. Paul.

It remains unclear exactly how the popular Route 21 will be impacted. Metro Transit officials estimate 10,000 people ride the 21 route each week day.

But the recent decision to run the B Line from a Southwest/Green Line stop near Minneapolis’ Uptown neighborhood to the Union Depot transit hub in downtown St. Paul represents a win for east metro transit advocates who sought continuous end-to-end service.

The prospect of ending the line in the Midway, as previously proposed, was criticized as a half-measure.

“When we started the planning for this, the line only went as far east as Snelling Avenue,” said Charles Carlson, director of Bus Rapid Transit Projects for Metro Transit. “We got some encouragement, especially from the St. Paul Area Chamber of Commerce, to look at extending the line into downtown St. Paul.”

METRO TRANSIT SEEKS OPERATORS

Engineering the B Line, which could roll out by the end of 2023, is one of the happier challenges ahead for Metro Transit in 2020.

The transit authority continues to grapple with a worker shortage that has it seeking roughly 100 new transit operators, as well as an operating budget stitched together from legislative cash infusion to legislative cash infusion.

A Jan. 11 recruitment event aims to truncate a driver application process that usually takes weeks, if not months, into a matter of hours.

A commercial driver’s license is not needed to apply.

Prospective drivers can complete on-site drug testing and initial CDL testing, and leave with conditional offers of employment. Information will be posted to metrotransit.org/drive.

The transit authority is also offering \$1,000 signing bonuses and bus driver wages of \$20.44 per hour.

“Our goal is to have about 1,538 operators,” said Metro Transit spokesman Howie Padilla.

B LINE: 10 MAJOR TRANSIT LINKS

The B Line, [a major east-west route for Metro Transit](#), will connect at least 10 of the transit authority’s most important planned and existing transit corridors, including Metro Transit’s two light rail lines and three BRT lines.

William Schroeer, executive director of the municipal coalition East Metro Strong, said the St. Paul Area Chamber, Ecolab and his transit advocacy group all pushed for a complete route to the Union Depot, where the B Line will meet [the future Rush Line](#), expected to travel to downtown White Bear Lake, and [the future Gold Line](#), which will travel to Woodbury.

“BRT between Roseville, St. Paul, and Minneapolis on the A Line has been an enormous success, boosting ridership ... and drawing economic development,” Schroeer said. “We are eager to bring that same success to Marshall and Selby in St. Paul.”

The B Line will be Metro Transit’s fourth arterial bus rapid transit line and run along the Route 21 corridor, which bears the distinction of having the second-highest bus ridership in the region, but some of the slowest overall speeds.

The west metro terminus, currently in Minneapolis’ Uptown, would change to a Southwest Light Rail Transit station once the Green Line extension to Eden Prairie is up and running.

Together, the Route 21 and Route 53 buses average about 10,000 weekday riders, traveling 10 and 13.2 miles per hour, respectively.

30 PERCENT RIDERSHIP INCREASE

EXPECTED

With fewer stops, more comfortable seats, wider aisles, prepaid fares, front- and rear-door boarding, preference at red lights and other train-like features, travel is expected to be at least 30 percent faster and up to 30 percent more popular.

In other words, the B Line would be able to complete in 33 minutes a trip from Lake Street and Lyndale Avenue in Minneapolis to Snelling and University avenues in St. Paul, a route that takes the Route 21 bus a full 48 minutes.

The line will operate in normal traffic.

If the [growing ridership on the A Line](#) — which follows Ford Parkway and Snelling Avenue from 46th Street Station in Minneapolis to the Rosedale Center shopping mall in Roseville — is any indication, arterial BRT services don't just get existing riders to their destinations faster. They may draw new passengers.

"We're increasing ridership in those corridors by 30 percent, and they start out as some of the busiest corridors," said Metro Transit General Manager Wes Kooistra.

Engineering for the B Line is expected to begin shortly, with a public draft of the corridor plans likely available in the spring. The Metropolitan Council will be presented with the plans for adoption next summer. Construction could begin by 2022, with a debut by the end of 2023.

STATE FUNDING

Much will depend on Gov. Tim Walz and his bonding budget proposal, a major funding source for public construction projects across the state.

Metro Transit is requesting \$50 million in state bond funds for the continued build-out of the arterial BRT network, most of which would go toward the B Line.

Some of that money also would be used to complete the D Line, an arterial BRT project that connects the Brooklyn Center Transit Station to the Mall of America in Bloomington.

B. Kyle, president and CEO of the St. Paul Area Chamber, said that partly as a result of the regional and national labor shortage, the “unwavering drumbeat from the business community has been the ever-growing need for more transit investments like the B Line. We recognize that improved transit is crucial to connect workers to opportunity, and employers to broader labor pools.”

FINANCIAL OUTLOOK POST-2020: STRETCHED

Looking beyond arterial bus rapid transit, Metro Transit is signaling that budget pressures continue to roil the transit authority, which is rolling forward with temporary cash infusions from the Legislature instead of full funding for the two-year budget cycle.

“We continue to get one-time money — band-aids,” Kooistra said.

To fund bus operations, the transit authority relies heavily on farebox revenue, some limited advertising revenue, a motor vehicle sales tax and federal and state dollars.

The budget for bus operations alone amounts to \$400 million for the year, or \$800 million for the biennium. By 2022-2023, that figure is expected to rise to \$845 million.

“In 2020, in order to meet budget, we’re using \$22 million to \$23 million of reserves, so we are tight,” Kooistra said. “We are trying to get to the next budget session when we can make a request for base money. In the 2021 legislative session, we’ll be needing about \$60 million for the biennium.”

Kooistra said motor vehicle sales taxes have come in about \$40 million short of projections — of \$10 million short each year for the past four years — which speaks to larger issues about how the state funds public transit.

“We’re relying on the health of the car sales market to fund transit,” he said.

In the last legislative session, Walz proposed a one-eighth-cent sales tax to cover general transit funding and the expansion of the arterial bus rapid transit network, but the proposal was not adopted by lawmakers.

Instead, “we cut some service, we delayed needed (administrative) hiring, we delayed other investments that we need that we can’t delay forever,” Kooistra said. “We’ve had some savings from the operator shortage, so we’ve been scraping along. We need operators. Right now, we’re 99 operators short.”

Tags: [Metro Transit](#),
[St. Paul](#), [Transportation](#)

Frederick Melo

| St. Paul reporter

Frederick Melo was once sued by a reader for \$2 million but kept on writing. He came to the Pioneer Press in 2005 and brings a testy East Coast attitude to St. Paul beat reporting. He spent nearly six years covering crime in the Dakota County courts before switching focus to the St. Paul mayor's office, city council, and all things neighborhood-related, from the city's churches to its parks and light rail. A resident of Hamline-Midway, he is married to a Frogtown woman. He Tweets with manic intensity at @FrederickMelo.

fmelo@pioneerpress.com  Follow
Frederick Melo [@FrederickMelo](#)



SPONSORED CONTENT

Save Up To \$3704 Off Your Mortgage (See If You Qualify)



By Refinance Home Loans



[Click Here For More Details](#)

As you comment, please be respectful of other commenters and other viewpoints. Our goal with article comments is to provide a space for civil, informative and constructive conversations. We reserve the right to remove any comment we deem to be defamatory, rude, insulting to others, hateful, off-topic or reckless to the community. See our full terms of use [here](#).

[VIEW COMMENTS](#)

