

NEWS

Metro Transit: Two of next three BRT buses should run through east metro

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When Metro Transit presents its recommendations for bus rapid transit service to the Metropolitan Council on Wednesday, a corridor running along Rice and Robert streets in St. Paul and adjoining suburbs will be in the queue, as will a route along Como and Maryland avenues.

In other words, in addition to the planned Marshall Avenue-Lake Street corridor, two of the three arterial bus rapid transit routes to be constructed in the latter half of the decade are likely to travel through the east metro, improving public transit links between St. Paul and the southern suburbs in Dakota County, among other destinations. Several steps remain before that becomes a reality, including a vote of the full Met Council — the metro's regional planning agency — to be held March 25. Everything depends upon securing sufficient state and regional funding.

Nevertheless, East Metro Strong, a coalition of cities, counties and employers pushing to expand transit access, is already hailing the Metro Transit recommendation as a win for the east metro.

"I think Metro Transit has run an extraordinarily thoughtful process in choosing where to place the next investments, and we're just delighted," said Will Schroeer, executive director of East Metro Strong, which represents Ramsey and Washington counties, six east metro cities including St. Paul, and 3M and M Health Fairview. "They started with 20 potential lines, then they narrowed it to 10, then they narrowed it to four. Two of the top three that they are announcing will be in the east metro."

Schroeer said his members agree that improved public transit is key to improving job access and drawing and retaining employers, and they've repeatedly made that case to the Met Council. Arterial bus rapid transit — which travels in regular traffic but enjoys certain privileges, such as preference at traffic signals — generally offers fewer stops and shorter travel times than traditional bus service, electronic payment at heated shelters, electronic signage indicating when the next bus arrives, boarding from the back and the front of the bus, cloth seats, WiFi and other amenities more commonly associated with light rail or suburban commuter service than with urban bus routes.

Prior to the pandemic, Metro Transit's A Line along Snelling Avenue and C Line from downtown Minneapolis to Brooklyn Center had resulted in strong ridership that eclipsed the local routes they shadowed, evidence the enhancements had helped draw new riders on top of the corridor's traditional customer base.

"We're going to be at the Legislature pointing out how successful BRT has been in the region," Schroeer said. "Pre-COVID, both the A and C lines really saw dramatic ridership jumps once they launched. We're going to be reminding legislators of that success, and encouraging them to do more. The (New Flyer) buses are made right here in Minnesota in St. Cloud and in Crookston. It's a jobs program, as well."

Two arterial bus rapid transit routes are currently being designed and readied for construction, with a third in the wings. The D Line, which will be under construction from this spring to the end of 2022, will mostly run along Chicago and Fremont avenues from Bloomington to Brooklyn Center. The B Line will run along Lake Street in Minneapolis and Marshall and Selby avenues in St. Paul into downtown St. Paul, with construction starting in 2023. That line would open in 2024 and will be followed by the E Line, which will largely travel along Hennepin and France avenues.

After that, next steps have been largely up in the air until now, though Metro Transit officials have said their general goal would be to construct at least one BRT route per year, if funding allows.

The 19-page proposal that will be presented to the Met Council on Wednesday by BRT Projects Assistant Director Katie Roth envisions the following schedule, with all three lines operational by 2030 if funding allows:

- The F Line will travel along Central Avenue from downtown Minneapolis north through Columbia Heights and Fridley into Blaine, carrying a projected 12,000 passengers annually by the year 2040. The existing Route 10 corridor carries about 7,000 as of 2019. Capital costs will run to \$81 million, with an annual operating cost of \$15 million. Construction would take place in 2025 if funding is secured.
- The G Line will travel from Rice Street in Little Canada, north of St. Paul, down through downtown St. Paul along Robert Street and into Dakota County, up to the border of West St. Paul and Mendota Heights at Mendota Road. Capital costs will run to \$78 million, with an annual operating cost of \$26 million. Ridership is forecast to grow from 3,800 existing passengers on traditional bus routes to 9,100 passengers on the BRT line by the year 2040.
- The H Line will travel from downtown Minneapolis and follow Como and Maryland avenues into St. Paul's East Side, traveling along White Bear Avenue to the Sun Ray Shopping Center, where it will connect with the Gold Line. Capital costs will run \$104.5 million and estimated annual operating costs will run to \$21 million. Ridership is forecast to grow from 5,700 to 11,600 passengers by the year 2040.

Also under recent consideration was a corridor that would travel from Bloomington to New Brighton, north of Minneapolis, along Lyndale Avenue and Johnson Street. That corridor would be under consideration for later development.

“As we share this as an information item, it represents a pretty robust process, and we’ve heard good feedback on that process so far,” Roth said.

East metro advocates will continue to push for construction priority, given the degree to which major transit investments such as the Blue Line light rail corridor, the Northstar Commuter Rail and several planned or existing BRT lines have seemingly favored the west metro. Metro Transit also runs the Red Line, a limited-stop bus rapid transit service with its own dedicated travel lanes that connects Dakota County suburbs to Bloomington.

“I’m just really excited, and I’ve talked to a lot of folks in the east metro who are excited,” Schroeer said. “We thought there was a strong case for Rice and Robert to go first, and we hope that the Met Council — which still has to approve these — takes a hard look at which line should go first.”

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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.

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