

News **Metro**

Turns out ‘ambassadors’ would make Metro Transit trains and buses safer

A report commissioned by East Metro Strong found that using non-police staff on buses and trains to deal with fare evasions and minor misbehavior has produced “genuine safety benefits” in other cities around the country.

By [Peter Callaghan](#) | MinnPost Staff Writer



The concept of using non-transit police staff on buses and trains was part of legislation proposed by both DFLers and some Republicans in the Minnesota House as a response to increased serious crime as well as lesser offenses like fare evasion, fighting, harassment, smoking and amplified music.

MinnPost photo by Peter Callaghan

July 24, 2020 Earlier this year, when Will Schroer, the executive director of the business and government transit advocacy organization East Metro Strong, was testifying before a Legislative committee, he heard questions he didn't know the answer to.



Will Schroer

There to support a plan to authorize the use of non-police staff for fare enforcement on buses and trains operated by Metro Transit, he was asked: Had a civilian response to problems like fare evasion and minor misbehavior on transit worked anywhere else? Does using staff who aren't law enforcement officers — sometimes called transit ambassadors — reduce evasion and behaviors such as smoking and rowdiness on transit? Do they replace transit police or assist them? Do people who oversee transit security in other cities think they're a good idea?

That was before the novel coronavirus put the Legislature and all of state government into pandemic response. Still, the issue of security on trains and buses wasn't going away, nor was the debate over how best to respond.

To find some answers, the board of East Metro Strong commissioned Schroeer and consultant Mary Kay Bailey, who had been director of the Central Corridor Funders Collaborative during the planning and construction of the Green Line, to take a look. The pair talked to officials responsible for transit security with Seattle-Tacoma-based Sound Transit, San Francisco's city bus system and the Bay Area Rapid Transit agency (BART). They also looked at policies in Snohomish County north of Seattle, Dallas, Boston, San Diego, Buffalo, Denver, Philadelphia and Portland.

“We learned that it was not a feel-good (response), that it had genuine safety benefits for all kinds of good reasons,” Schroeer said.

Their [report, completed in April, offers two recommendations for the Twin Cities](#) that don't replace police but supplement them. “Other agencies, with the same goals as ours, have faced similar decisions about how best to size and use their police forces,” Schroeer and Bailey concluded. “We recommend implementing the lessons they learned: 1. Add a substantial number of non-sworn staff as an important part of creating a safe, comfortable, welcoming experience for all Minnesotans and visitors using transit. 2. Classify fare non-payment as a petty misdemeanor to allow such non-sworn staff to enforce fare policy.”

A top priority for the Met Council

The ambassador concept was part of [legislation proposed by both DFLers and some Republicans in the Minnesota House](#) as a response to increased serious crime as well as lesser offenses like fare evasion, fighting, harassment, smoking and amplified music. While the plan also included increases in traditional law enforcement and enhanced video security, it was less focused on increased police and enforcement than a plan originally put forward by the GOP.

Some in the GOP teased that transit ambassadors were a touchy-feely response to public safety, comparing them to train conductors who handed out maps and gave riding tips to tourists rather than enforcers of the law. Backers, in turn, compared them to the Minneapolis Downtown Improvement District's neon-shirted ambassadors who do help tourists but also de-escalate problems and call in city police when needed.

Gov. Tim Walz

MinnPost photo by Peter Callaghan

After the homicide of George Floyd, House DFL sponsors dropped their support for any law enforcement response, though Gov. Tim Walz continued to advocate for the Met Council, which oversees Metro Transit, to use new funds for transit agents, security cameras and policing. That issue, however, did not make the cut for the very limited agenda in a second special session that concluded earlier this week, and a proposal for a small supplemental budget (which didn't pass anyway) no longer contained money and legal authorization for the program.

The Met Council plans to try again. In a letter written by Met Council Chair Charlie Zelle in response to concerns about equity raised by transit staff members, transit agents are still envisioned as a means toward increasing security without increasing the inequitable treatment of people of color. "Beginning with the 2019 legislative

session, we advocated for the ability to shift away from having only sworn officers checking fares and to create an administrative citation, both the change who is enforcing fares and to reduce both the cost and impact by removing the criminal penalty,” Zelle wrote. “This is our top legislative priority, and we’ll continue advocating for it as the Legislature convenes this year, and in future sessions.”

Letting police focus on policing

The East Metro Strong report authors said they didn’t know what they were going to find when they contacted other cities. But they were struck by the consistency of the responses they received from transit agency staffers they spoke with, which often boiled down to: Adding non-sworn or non-police staff lets police focus on policing.

Non-sworn staff act as force multipliers, deterring and reducing crime by “projecting authority” and by putting more eyes and ears on vehicles and platforms, they found. Such personnel is also usually cheaper to hire and train than police officers. “More police alone do not necessarily make a place feel safer,” the report notes. “We were struck by the consistency of what we heard from security personnel across the country and its consistency with findings from earlier national research on best practices.”

The study was produced after the COVID-19 crisis had closed large sections of the economy and significantly reduced transit service and ridership but before the homicide of George Floyd, which widely affected public and political attitudes toward policing. Yet Schroer said he didn’t think the conclusions would be that different had it been written after Floyd’s death.

“It already came out of a set of questions which we are now asking with renewed and legitimately more urgency,” he said. “How do we have an official presence on transit and what jobs do we need done by that official presence and who should do them? What we heard

from these other agencies was: We should have police on transit — there is a need for that and a role for that — and there are also other jobs that don't need police to do them and are better done by people who are not police," he said.

The most familiar example of the concept is the Minneapolis Downtown Improvement District's brightly-clad ambassadors, a program that was introduced in 2009. Schroeer said his conversations with DID leaders showed that they think the area is safer due to the presence of police and non-police. "Nobody really feels a lot safer with a lot of police around," he said. "If we had a magic wand and could hire all the police in the world, we wouldn't do it because it's not what we want downtown Minneapolis to feel like."

Steve Cramer

Police officers, however, are a radio call away if civilian ambassadors get into a situation they can't safely handle.

Steve Cramer, the president and CEO of Minneapolis Downtown Council, which runs the Downtown Improvement District, said the association is pleased with the campaign and has renewed its contract with the company that hires, trains and manages the ambassadors. The \$3.5 million project normally has 75-80 people working the 120-block downtown area in the summer.

The ambassadors are equipped only with a radio and are trained to help tourists as well as direct people toward mental health and homeless services. It requires a certain set of skills that combine enforcement and social work. Unlike what Metro Transit might be planning, however, they have no enforcement authority. “That role is more robust in terms of the responsibilities,” Cramer said. “Being able to issue citations is something that we don’t do.”



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