The Twin Cities’ Transit Awakening: Momentum Surging for New Mobility Options

By Rich Sampson

There is a moment in the lifespan of some American metropolises when transit becomes not just something the city has – a service or infrastructure like any other – but instead transforms into something they are known for, a part of their identity. Think of New York City and Boston in the early 20th century. How about the opening of the Washington Metro or Bay Area Rapid Transit in the 1970s? Or Portland in the mid-1990s or Los Angeles under recently mayor Antonio Villaragosa. For the Twin Cities of Minneapolis and St. Paul, that moment of transit awakening is now.

Few other cities find themselves at that exciting yet challenging point where momentum and resources come together to fundamentally reshape mobility trends and habits. A score of new transit projects – from commuter and light rail to bus rapid transit, exclusive bus-only shoulder lanes and park-and-ride locations – are all either recently-completed or moving rapidly through planning and construction. In all, it amounts to nothing short of a new beginning for public transit options in Minnesota’s most-populated region.

A New Twist on an Old Tale

The plot summary of the history of transit in the Twin Cities is a familiar read to most observers of urban development during the past century: the first horse-drawn streetcars emerged in the late 1800s operated by private entities, followed by conversion to electric traction not long after and ultimately replaced by diesel buses between 1940 and 1970 before finally shifting to public authorities. Such was the case in Minneapolis and St. Paul, whose streetcar networks once rivaled the fabled Pacific Electric Red Car.
network in Southern California. Of course, the area’s public bus routes provided crucial service to those who needed it most, bringing people to and from work, medical appointments, community services and more.

The moment when the storyline shifts, though, came in 1967, when the Minnesota Legislature created the Metropolitan Council, whose initial raison d’etre was to end contamination of the area’s water network – a job too large for a single jurisdiction. Indeed, at the time of the Council’s creation, more than 200 municipal agencies and departments existed in the seven-county metropolitan area. One such trans-jurisdictional service that became the domain of the Council was the region’s transit network. In just its first five years of operation, the Council’s transit division – today known as Metro Transit – replaced a total of 465 buses to provide reliable service.

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“After decades of discussion, our opportunity came with the Hiawatha Line,” Metro Transit General Manager Brian Lamb told RAIL Magazine in a phone interview last year. “Like many regions, there was so much angst and apprehension before the first rail line, but now it’s become ‘why isn’t it here yet?’ in communities waiting for the next line.”

“The success of the Hiawatha line started to bring the region together on transit,” adds John Siqveland, Public Relations Manager for Metro Transit, noting the route – recently re-branded as the METRO Blue Line – draws more than 31,000 daily riders, the busiest transit line in Minnesota. “Now the transit system is increasingly viewed as a solution to development, land use and affordable travel.”

Service First, Regardless of Mode

Even though the Blue Line light rail marked a new level of awareness of transit’s potential in the Twin Cities, rail lines were never envisioned as the only means of leveraging a greater presence of public transportation in the region. Alongside the METRO Green Line light-rail route – of which RAIL Magazine witnessed its green opening firsthand on June 14, along with a who’s who of Minnesota’s federal, state and local elected officials, is now operating between the existing Blue Line in downtown Minneapolis and downtown St. Paul – and a handful of other light-rail and commuter rail lines in various stages of planning, Metro Transit fields an aggressive approach to local and regional bus routes.

The Green Line represents one of the nation’s most ambitious transportation projects. The 11-mile line not only connects two dynamic downtown cores, but more than a dozen neighborhoods served by its 18 new stations, as well as service through the heart of the University of Minnesota main campus, which spans both banks of the Mississippi River. The project was the first to take advantage of new criteria established by the Federal Transit Administration in 2009 under the Obama Administration that evaluate other criteria beyond cost-effectiveness and travel time savings. That allowed Metro Transit planners to re-instate three stations – at Hamline, Victoria and Western – that had previously been eliminated because they would have slowed down travel times through the corridor, stops that were demanded by citizen groups and community leaders along the route. The additional stations have been well-
Metro Transit’s ever-expanding network of light-rail, bus rapid transit and commuter rail lines includes seven routes either in service, under construction or in advanced planning (left). A longer-term vision for the region includes additional routes focused around The Interchange in Minneapolis and St. Paul’s Union Depot as the focal points of transit in the Twin Cities region.
received in the line’s opening days: although Metro Transit estimated the Green Line will host more than 42,000 daily riders by 2030, its trains are already carrying more than 27,000 daily passengers in its initial weeks of service, despite the University of Minnesota’s summer break.

The system’s 123 bus routes serve more than 100 park-and-ride facilities through its service area and have access to more than 300 miles of bus-only shoulder lanes on highways and thoroughfares, the largest such program of its kind in the nation. The bus-only shoulder lanes program began in 1991 and includes extensive awareness training for drivers to avoid incursions with distressed vehicles and navigating the narrow shoulder lanes, all while reducing travel times and boosting reliability of numerous bus routes by avoiding traffic congestion. Metro Transit also stresses its Hi-Frequency Network, a collection of 12 routes that operate at least every 15 minutes from 6:00 a.m., to 7:00 p.m., on weekdays and from 9:00 a.m., to 6:00 p.m., on Saturdays.

Elsewhere, the network’s innovative “Marq2” corridor on Marquette and 2nd avenues accommodates 80 percent of Metro Transit’s express buses with vehicles alternating stops every other block to move transit traffic through the dedicated lanes during rush hours. The Marq2 corridor – not quite Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) which was completed in 2009 – included rebuilt streets to accommodate the greater volume of buses, new heated and lit bus shelters, real-time passenger information, wider sidewalks, bike racks, trees and public art. Both streets are located within a block of Blue Line light-rail stations.

The METRO Red Line – the region’s first true BRT route – opened for service on June 22, 2013. The 16-mile corridor connects passengers from Blue Line trains at the Mall of America station with Lakeville through five total stations. Using dedicated lanes on Minnesota State Highway 77, the line includes signal priority, permanent platform stations and all-doors boarding, among other amenities. Also in development is the METRO Orange Line BRT along Interstate 35W, which will connect downtown Minneapolis with Bloomington and Burnsville. For Metro Transit, the route’s color designates its high-capacity transit status alongside the Blue and Green light-rail lines, further proof of the system’s commitment to innovative bus transit.

Metro Transit also offers an advanced, unified payment mechanism called the Go-To
Card, which allows riders to use a single card to access the entire network, ranging from Northstar commuter rail to neighborhood bus routes. Northstar riders, in particular, benefit from easy-to-use payment lanes at Target Field station in downtown Minneapolis designated by their ultimate destination, an approach unique among commuter rail systems. Since its introduction in 2007, use of Go-To Card has risen to more than 50 percent of Metro Transit passengers and includes special configurations for both older and younger riders, as well as targeted platforms for employers, schools and non-profits. Go-To Card users can also enroll in an auto-refill program that refreshes the card’s balance when it gets too low.

“We find that new ways of incorporating both bus and rail modes are the best way to serve our customers,” explains Siqveland. “We look for long-term approaches that respond to community needs while providing the highest level of service possible.”

“It’s not just for the build-out of projects that we have a good reputation, but our focus on customers, technology and environmental improvement is what has earned us trust in the region,” says Lamb.

Union Depot & The Interchange: The Twin Beacons of Transit

It seems fitting that for a region known as the Twin Cities, there should be two complementary landmarks for mobility. In downtown St. Paul, the historic 1917 Union Depot recently completed an extensive restoration, paving way for renewed transportation activity at a facility that once hosted more than 280 daily trains on 18 tracks and 9 platforms. Today, five Metro Transit bus routes serve the Depot, with another three operated by the Minnesota Valley Transit Authority and intercity bus service provided by Jefferson Lines.

As of May 7, 2014, Amtrak has returned its Empire Builder trains between Chicago and Seattle or Portland after passenger rail service was shifted to the less-accessible Midway Station in 1978.

Additionally, the METRO Green Line light rail route now calls the Depot its eastern terminus, while additional light-rail or commuter rail lines on the Red Rock and Gateway corridors could also serve the station in the future. Plans for potential intercity and high-speed rail lines reaching as far as Duluth,
Rochester and Chicago also include service to the Union Depot.

While the revitalized historic nature of Union Depot corresponds well with the industrial past of St. Paul, its counterpart in downtown Minneapolis – Target Field Station, formerly known as The Interchange – strikes a modern tone. The facility adjacent to the Minnesota Twins’ Target Field serves as the current terminus for both the Blue and Green lines and Northstar commuter rail to Big Lake and not only helps channel passengers to rail and bus transit routes more conveniently – especially on Twins game days and other special events downtown – but also serves as a community gathering place for downtown Minneapolis and fuel development in the nearby North Loop and Warehouse District neighborhoods. Among the project’s innovative design elements are The Great Lawn green space, The Cascade outdoor amphitheatre and recreation plaza and other open public areas. The Cascade amphitheatre even includes an innovative trench among its rows of seating for bicyclists to easily roll their tires down the steps, one of many features that wouldn’t be out of place in community spaces in European and Asian cities. Target Field Station also fosters future extensions of the Blue Line on the Bottineau corridor to Osseo and the Green Line through the Southwest corridor to Eden Prairie, as well as potential intercity rail service to Duluth via the proposed Northern Lights Express.

“The combination of the Union Depot in St. Paul and The Interchange in Minneapolis represent very strong, tangible presences for transit,” says Siqveland. “They offer fantastic regional connectivity and set the stage for future high-capacity routes going forward.”

An Epic Expansion Effort

The Twin Cities’ aggressive expansion of transit options is not in end in of itself for the region, but rather a clear path to respond to the area’s shifting identity. The region’s population bottomed out in the early 1980s at just
played no small role in shaping the region’s direction. “The metro area’s popularity is no accident and residents are privileged to live in a region with an ongoing commitment to planning, calculated and wise investment, and civic engagement.”

In this environment, decisions impacting the future of transit in the region receive strong interest. Any observers who paid only cursory attention to local media in the Twin Cities region over the past several years would assume that the Southwest Corridor project is mired in turmoil. And, to wit, there has been no shortage of coverage on Metro Transit’s plans to extend the Green Line south and west to neighborhoods and communities from downtown Minneapolis to Eden Prairie, using a combination of former and current railroad rights-of-way and new infrastructure.

But rather than a contentious process debating whether the line should be built at all, the discussion instead revolves around exactly where and how it should travel. The planning process for the Southwest Corridor has studied intricate trenches and underpasses beneath active freight rail lines and pedestrian/bicycle paths, around numerous lakes and ponds and to important concentrations of housing, jobs and commercial activity to assemble a route that links many of the region’s most rapidly-growing communities. Currently, the regional Metropolitan Council has approved the basic alignment of the corridor and five local juris-

over two million and has added more than 700,000 new residence since then to reach more than 2.8 million people – a trend that is only expected to continue in coming years. By 2040, the population will grow by another 890,000 residents, according to the Metropolitan Council. That growth is fueled by parallel interest by both millennials and baby boomers in living in livable communities and neighborhoods. The Twin Cities’ collection of historic residential areas and emerging, revitalized districts perhaps represents an ideal intersection of supply and demand, enhanced by a vital, expanding transit network.

“The economists who do this forecasting are looking at demographic trends; they’re looking at market forces; they’re looking at real estate behavior, consumer choices,” said Metropolitan Council Chairwoman Sue Haigh, the current leader of the entity whose creation

The Metropolitan Council – through its Metro Transit operating agency – is cultivating an extensive set of regional, high-capacity transit projects (left), while the cities of Saint Paul (above) and Minneapolis (below) are working on local streetcar routes.
dictions to be served by the line – Minneapolis, St. Louis Park, Hopkins, Minnetonka, and Eden Prairie – are in the process of providing their consent to the final alignment. Should those entities consent to the project, the Metropolitan Council – via Metro Transit – will seek out federal, state and local funding to support the $1.7 billion effort, which would begin service in 2019 and carry more than 29,000 daily riders by 2030 to 16 new stations on 15.8 miles of new rail.

“The beginning of the municipal consent process signifies the conclusion of two and half years of close work between the Council, Hennepin County and the five cities along the line,” said Haigh. “The next 75 days will give local policymakers a chance to discuss and debate this regional investment and what it will mean to their community. In the last year, we have come far to find solutions to numerous technical challenges. I know we can do this together for the good of the region. We must. The Southwest Corridor is projected to add 30,000 additional households and 60,000 additional jobs by 2030.”

Although the path towards agreement for the Southwest Corridor has been a circuitous one, it indicates how much the narrative regarding rail transit projects has shifted since the Hiawatha Blue Line unfolded slowly and contentiously over more than three decades. Less turbulent has been the process to extend the Blue Line along the Bottineau Boulevard corridor, stretching north and west from downtown Minneapolis, serving the communities of Golden Valley, Robbinsdale, Crystal and Brooklyn Park. The line – which will utilize a diverse mix of track alignments on and alongside Olson Memorial Highway, BNSF’s existing freight rail corridor and West Broadway Avenue – is expected to carry more than 27,000 daily riders by 2030. Service could begin as early as 2019, although further steps in the environmental assessment and engineering processes might push that schedule back into the early 2020s.

“Bottineau is key to the region’s future development and continued economic success,” adds Haigh.

While the Southwest and Bottineau extensions to the Green and Blue lines, respectively, are the Twin Cities potential rail transit lines have advanced most thoroughly through the planning process, another half dozen light-rail, commuter rail and streetcar projects could also begin construction over the next decade. The Rush Line corridor would broaden the Northstar commuter rail network to connect Union Depot with Hinkley, 80 miles to the northeast while the Red Rock Corridor would employ the same mode starting at Target Field Station, traveling through Union Depot and then 30 miles to the southeast to reach Hastings. Meanwhile, the Gateway Corridor Commission is currently studying a new light-rail route stretching 11 miles east from Union Depot parallel to the increasingly-congested Interstate 94 to Woodbury, a corridor expected to add more than 60,000 new jobs and increase in population by 40 percent by 2030. Light-rail lines are also under consideration for the Central Avenue, I-35W and TH 36/NE corridors, emerging from Target Field Station to communities and neighborhoods to the north and east, as is Bus Rapid Transit for those same routes. At the same time, the city of Minneapolis is undertaking environmental studies for the region’s first modern streetcar operation, a 3.4-mile line along Nicolet and Hennepin Avenues, intersecting the Blue and Green lines in downtown Minneapolis much
like the Portland Streetcar interacts with that city’s MAX light-rail network. The service is expected to attract more than 9,200 daily riders by 2030 and would set the stage for additional streetcar routes on the city’s Midtown and West Broadway corridors. St. Paul is also examining its own return of streetcars, having identified a number of potential corridors in its recent Streetcar Feasibility Study. When combined, the Twin Cities planned high-capacity transit projects are as ambitious as long-range plans in the nation’s largest metropolitan regions such as New York City, Baltimore-Washington, Chicago and Southern California.

**Hallmarks of a New Transit Era**

Interacting in-person with the various elements of transit in the Twin Cities – whether they be existing or in development – there’s no avoiding the perceptible momentum growing for mobility in the region. More than 81 million passengers ride the system each year, and ridership grew by more than 300,000 additional riders in 2013 alone. New bus and rail services and infrastructure projects seem to move quicker now, and riders transferring between complementary modes deliver energy befitting a region eagerly embracing its future.

“We have a very robust vision for transit improvements, but need a reliable, dedicated funding source,” says Lamb. “We have made great progress with Governor Dayton and the current Legislature. Individual projects are good, but we aim to implement a larger vision for the next 10 to 15 years.”

This sense of transit was best exemplified when RAIL Magazine’s editorial staff rode on a Metro Transit bus from the St. Paul Union Depot on a typical weekday rush hour. Our driver – courteous and engaging with us as a couple of out-of-town visitors asking about fares and the most convenient stop to disembark – knew most of her riders personally, pointing out the various connections and transfers available to the rest of the region, places she enjoyed going herself.

“There’s a lot happening here now with transit,” she said. “It’s exciting to be a part of and I can’t wait to see what’s coming next.”