More Mass Transit Coming to the Eastern Metropolitan Area

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With the development and utilization of light rail transit (LRT), the Twin Cities continues to expand its mass transit capacities. The Northstar Line and Blue Line LRT serve areas in the western and central metro while the Green Line LRT runs through the central corridor, connecting the downtowns of Minneapolis and St. Paul.

The ongoing transit development also includes several future expansion proposals, some of which involve much needed service in the east metro area. This includes Metropolitan State’s main campus in Dayton’s Bluff, as well as east St. Paul and its suburbs. As of now, the Green Line’s easternmost stop is at Union Depot in St. Paul’s Lowertown district.

At one point, one of the proposals on the table was a transit line running through Swede Hollow Park, just next door to Metro State. A railroad once ran through Swede Hollow, so technically, it is a “transit right of way,” according to Tom Cook, who is special assistant to the president at Metro State.

For this reason, federal guidelines required that Swede Hollow at least be considered by the Metropolitan Council. This is an organization that serves the Twin Cities metropolitan area in such aspects as policy-making, planning and providing essential services. Swede Hollow’s consideration had to do with the Rush Line, which is still in the early planning stage. This line would run approximately 80 miles, from Union Depot north to, ultimately, Hinckley. Swede Hollow has since been removed from the list of likely routes, after an initial study by the Metropolitan Council deemed it an unfavorable choice due to environmental impact and accessibility issues.

Another project that is beyond the planning phase and in development is the Gateway Corridor. This project’s purpose is to provide transit service to meet the needs for businesses and the traveling public, and doing so by connecting the east metro area to the greater Twin Cities region. One facet of the Gateway project is the Gold Line bus rapid transit (or BRT).

This line would start at Union Depot and run east for 12 miles along I-94 in a dedicated lane, on or next to Hudson Road. This means that these exclusive bus lanes would not be added to I-94, but would part of a separate bus-only system (it might also be used by emergency vehicles, when needed). The proposed route would provide all-day, frequent BRT service, including multiple stops in places such as east St. Paul, Maplewood, Landfall, Oakdale and Woodbury.

It would also include a stop close to Metro State; right now, the proposed stop would be at the junction of Third Street East and Kellogg Boulevard, just a few blocks southeast of Metro’s Dayton’s Bluff campus—although that location could change during the development process.

This could have a significant impact on those attending Metro State, students and faculty. “It would be a great way for both students and employees to access the east side, and for those that don’t own cars, or, for those that do but would rather not spend the time driving,” Cook said. “Along with money, another thing everybody is really short on is time,” he added. “The more time spent behind the wheel is less time studying; if you’ve got an hour-long transit, without having to drive it yourself, you can sit and study on your way there.”

The Gold Line BRT would also have a dual benefit, in that it would provide an all-day reliable service for those who want to come to St. Paul to, for example, shop, while also allowing those in the inner-city a way to get to their jobs in the eastern suburbs. So, in this way, it provides what Cook calls a “two-directional asset.”

Another option still on the table is to have the initial phase of the Rush Line traveling along East Seventh Street. One consideration regarding this is the added dimension of what Cook called “arterial bus rapid transit,” which has been utilized in other transit systems around the nation. This “hybrid” system involves a standard BRT line, with its own dedicated lane, that temporarily merges into general traffic at “pitch points” (spots such as busy intersections and overpasses where a separate lane isn’t feasible). It then gets back in to a dedicated lane to continue its route.

Of course, all of this is a moot point without the necessary funding and support. One big boost occurred about a year ago when, to paraphrase Cook, the Gold Line project became one of eleven national transit projects to be fast-tracked for review by the Obama Administration. Another potentially big step took place more locally.

On September 1, Governor Dayton met with civic leaders at Woodbury City Hall to discuss the proposed Gateway Gold Line. Members of the Gateway Corridor commission and others took this opportunity to further their point. That being the need for more state investment, and that the project was just as worthwhile as some of the high-profile transit projects in the west metro.

Speaking on behalf of Metro State, Cook stated that the Gateway bus line would make it easier for students commuting to the east side campus, and would also be beneficial to those coming there to use the new Science Center. Convinced of a need for additional funds, Gov. Dayton said that, while he couldn’t guarantee passage by the Legislature, he would support adding $3 million for the Gold Line project to the next session’s budget.

The present timeline for the Gold Line BRT to be fully operational is 2023. This might seem like a long time, but a project of this magnitude is quite complex, usually covering a 10-year span. A draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS)—for the 12-mile stretch crossing six cities and two counties—is currently being completed. The DEIS uncovers information regarding the impact on areas such as noise levels, parks and public land, air quality, traffic, economic development, and more.

The DEIS also establishes a locally preferred alternative (LPA), a general description of what is, seemingly, the preferred route. All six cities and two counties approved the LPA in the fall of 2014. Next is the Project Development phase, followed by final engineering and, lastly, construction.

Whatever time it takes, the Gold Line BRT will be a welcome addition, and a boost for Metro State—as well as the eastern metropolitan area.