

# intransit

## Suburban Transit Association: A Minnesota Transit Success Story

By PATRICK MURRAY, Suburban Transit Association

Since 1984, commuters living in the Twin Cities suburbs have taken millions of trips provided by members of the Suburban Transit Association (STA). The STA is comprised of independent transit agencies that serve the suburban communities and have elected to provide services that more effectively meet the demands of their residents and the region. These transit agencies, all MPTA members, include Maple Grove Transit, Minnesota Valley Transit Authority, Plymouth Metrolink, Shakopee Transit and SouthWest Transit.

The STA develops programs to benefit the citizens and communities served by STA agencies. These agencies provide flexible transit services through a variety of programs, including flex routes, reverse commute services, local service between communities and/or regional transit centers, and local service within individual communities—including dial-a-ride services, elderly/disabled transportation services and shuttle service to community events; however, the primary product of STA agencies is express service to downtown Minneapolis during peak congestion periods.

Innovative approaches and strong customer service are hallmarks of STA agencies. Such approaches include the use of penalties and incentives to manage the private providers who operate the transit services. Other innovations include the use of coach-style buses, and focused service from transit hubs and park & rides.

As a partnership of public agencies and private companies, some STA agency employees are unionized and some are not. All are laser-focused on providing premier customer service. Many STA agency customers



2003-2007  
**40%**  
increase in ridership  
on STA agency buses

have several choices in how they commute, so the transit agencies have to prove on a daily basis they're worth the investment.

The innovative approaches taken by STA agencies are paying off. Not only are thousands of people living in the communities served by STA agencies using our buses, but every day, thousands of commuters from miles beyond our host cities are experiencing the comfort and convenience of our buses as well. As a result, from 2003 to 2007, ridership on STA agency buses increased by 40 percent.

Additionally, STA agencies have passenger satisfaction rates as high as 98 percent, and many STA agencies have been honored with the Minnesota Transit System of the Year Award and multiple national awards.

Is the Suburban Transit Association a Minnesota transit success story? You bet we are, and we're proud of it!



# From the President



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## President's Column

As we follow the latest action at the state and federal levels, it's clear that transit funding is in the news and on the line. This is a critical time for legislators to hear from our statewide association about the ongoing need for funding and the impact legislation has on constituents who rely on transit service.

The Minnesota Public Transit Association (MPTA) is closely monitoring and shaping legislation dealing with transit through our lobbyist. At the same time, we assist our members in reaching out to lawmakers directly. We had MPTA members representing transit at Transportation Day at the Capitol and will remain visible throughout the Legislative Session.

MPTA will be working to assist in organizing this year's Bus Roadeo scheduled for July 24th in Alexandria. Our association will be taking over some of the administrative duties including registration. Participants will be able to register for the event on our web site. There is more information about this upcoming event so visit our web site: [www.mpta-transit.org](http://www.mpta-transit.org)

We are continually reminded of one critical point: we can never rest on our laurels or remain complacent. Transit riders need visible, vocal, committed advocates looking out for them all the time. Without the support and participation of transit systems and advocates around the state, we would be dealing with a much more uncertain future.

The Minnesota Public Transit Association continues to provide the only statewide coalition of folks who work on the front-lines every day, providing transit service to thousands of Minnesotans. Your support of MPTA is crucial to our ability to educate decision makers, raise the level of awareness of transit benefits and secure the resources needed for all of us to do our jobs. Membership in the association provides a great value for all transit systems. The modest investment you make in membership pays off many times over. We need YOU as a MPTA member.

Look for more updates and important information from MPTA as the legislative session progresses.

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## New *InTransit* contact: Berta Hartig

*You'll notice a new look and feel to your bimonthly newsletter. I hope you find the changes refreshing and feel compelled to read every nugget of news. I welcome your suggestions and feedback — and your articles! Add me to your news contacts: [bertahartigcommunications@gmail.com](mailto:bertahartigcommunications@gmail.com).*

*In my "other life" I am the marketing coordinator at Metro Bus in St. Cloud. While I am a newbie to the world of transit (soon to celebrate two years at Metro Bus), I come to you with 12 years experience in the realm of marketing/communications/graphic design, and I will draw upon that experience to provide you with a quality newsletter.*

*Happy reading!*



# Legislative Update

Margaret Donahoe  
Advocacy Director  
Minnesota Public Transit Association

MPTA 2010 Legislative Agenda available at  
[www.mpta-transit.org](http://www.mpta-transit.org).

## MPTA board advocates funding transit in state capital bonding bill

The 2010 Legislative Session is the year that the Legislature typically passes a two-year capital bonding bill. The Minnesota Public Transit Association has been advocating for the inclusion of funding for transit capital needs in this year's bonding bill.

The Legislature moved quickly to pass a final bonding bill totaling close to \$1 billion in general obligation bonds for projects in all categories. However, the governor threatened to veto the entire bill due to its size and the omission of some projects that he considered critical.

The legislature decided to hold the bill rather than sending it on to the governor for his signature or veto.

*At this writing, negotiations between the legislature and governor are ongoing.*

As the legislative session progresses, we will continue to keep you informed of the latest developments.

Remember, legislators will need to hear from constituents about the importance of transit service throughout the session.



### MPTA Board advocates for funding for transit capital needs

#### Greater Minnesota Transit: \$29.14 million

The position approved by the MPTA Board of Directors included \$29.14 million for Greater Minnesota Transit to pay for the following facilities:

- **Mankato-Greater Mankato Transit System**  
New Bus Garage and Wash and Update Maintenance Facility ..... **\$5.2 million**
- **Rochester Public Transit**–New Transit Garage, Phase IV ..... **\$13.6 million**
- **Northfield Transit**–New Transit Station and Park & Ride ..... **\$520,000**
- **Duluth Transit Authority**–Multi-modal transit terminal ..... **\$9.6 million**
- **Stewartville Heartland Express**–  
New Park & Ride..... **\$220,000**

#### Metropolitan Area Transit: \$90.4 million

For Metropolitan Area Transit, the request was for \$90.4 million to cover:

- **Cedar Avenue Bus Rapid Transit** ..... **\$17.7 million**
- **Southwest Light Rail Transit** ..... **\$10 million**
- **Arterial Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) and Express Bus Transit Advantages** ..... **\$5 million**
- **Bottineau Corridor Light Rail Transit** ..... **\$1 million**
- **Central Corridor Light Rail Transit** ..... **\$3 million**
- **Minneapolis Transportation Interchange Facility** ..... **\$5 million**
- **Red Rock Transitway** – Park & Ride in Hastings ..... **\$500,000**
- **Robert Street Transitway** ..... **\$200,000**
- **Union Depot**..... **\$9 million**
- **Heywood Bus Garage** ..... **\$25 million**
- **Northstar Commuter Rail Phase II**..... **\$1 million**
- **Northern Lights Express**– passenger rail connecting TC & Duluth ..... **\$13 million**

#### The bill passed by the Legislature included:

\$2.5 million for Greater Minnesota Transit  
\$43.5 million for Twin Cities Metropolitan Area Transit





The low-floor articulated bus is 62' long, has a seating capacity for 62 and includes fold-out ramp and kneeling features.

## MVTA trials articulated bus

By ROBIN SELVIG, Minnesota Valley Transit Authority

BURNSVILLE – The Minnesota Valley Transit Authority (MVTA) has an articulated bus in trial service from Feb. 25 - March 6, 2010. The bus, provided by Nova, will operate on several MVTA routes, ensuring that passengers have the opportunity to provide feedback. Drivers and maintenance personnel also will have an opportunity to comment.

“As we look ahead to the operation of Bus Rapid Transit in the Cedar Avenue Corridor, we want to find vehicles that will provide the easy-on/easy-off required by passengers, while also meeting capacity needs,” said MVTA Executive Director Beverley Miller.

Offering a seating capacity of 62, plus significant standing capacity, the articulated bus can accommodate more riders than the largest bus in the MVTA fleet — currently the MCI Coach, which seats 57.

These low floor vehicles kneel, and feature a fold-out ramp, making it a good option as a potential Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) vehicle for the Cedar Avenue corridor. The MVTA will evaluate if there are specific routes that could take advantage of such additional capacity, and if there are any unique challenges to operating the 62' long bus. In addition to the fold-out ramp, the bus “kneels” to accommodate mobility-challenged riders.

The triple-axel, green bus will include overhead destination signs. Magnetic logos or decals will also be placed on the vehicle to help identify it as part of the MVTA fleet. Because this is a trial bus, bicycle racks and fareboxes are not installed. Fares will not be charged when the bus is in service.

On-board surveys will be distributed to collect information about the passenger experience: rider comfort, wheelchair accessibility, seating style, challenges in boarding/riding the vehicle and more.



Visit [www.mvta.com](http://www.mvta.com) for more information.

## MVTA names new board chair, announces new member



Will Branning, Dakota County Commissioner for District 7, was elected Chair of the MVTA Board.



Apple Valley Council Member Sharon LaComb was administered the Oath of Office as the new representative from Apple Valley, replacing long-time representative Ruth Grendahl.

Margaret Donahoe  
Advocacy Director  
Minnesota Public Transit Association

MPTA 2010 Legislative Agenda available at  
[www.mpta-transit.org](http://www.mpta-transit.org)

## Governor proposes cuts to balance budget Metropolitan Area and Greater Minnesota transit to feel impact

The other big issue of the session is, of course, the budget deficit. The legislature and governor will need to balance the general fund budget once again as tax receipts are not coming in at the levels anticipated during last year's legislative session. The February 2010 forecast shows a slight improvement, but still indicates that the general fund will face a \$994 million budget deficit.

The governor has released his proposal for how to balance the budget. It includes significant cuts in current programs throughout state government, especially for local units of government.

Governor Proposed Reductions for Metropolitan Council				
	FY2010	FY2011	FY2012	FY2013
Operating Reduction- Transit	(\$1.062M)	(\$2.118M)	(\$2.118M)	(\$2.118M)

This proposal reduces the Metropolitan Council's appropriations for operations permanently. The FY2011 reduction is approximately 3 percent of the council's general fund operating appropriation. To the extent possible, the council will look to administrative efficiencies to address the reductions, but there could be small impacts on routes and services.

Governor Proposed Reductions for Greater Minnesota				
	FY2010	FY2011	FY2012	FY2013
Unallotment Ratification			(\$1.625M)	(\$1.625M)
Transit Assistance Grants	(\$462,000)	(\$345,000)	(\$546,000)	(\$546,000)

This proposal recommends a reduction to the general fund appropriation for non-metro transit assistance grants. The FY2011 reduction is approximately 3 percent of the ongoing general fund appropriation in this area. This will likely reduce service hours and passenger trips in many small rural cities and towns across the state. This may mean a loss of access to public transit for some very small communities.

## Limited overnight parking available at Northstar stations



MINNEAPOLIS – Overnight parking is now permitted in lots adjacent to the five suburban Northstar rail stations.

“Some Northstar customers and potential customers have been requesting this option since we opened for service in mid-November,” said Brian Lamb, Metro Transit general manager.

Metro Transit does not permit overnight parking at its other park-and-ride lots in the metro area.

During a six-month pilot program, Metro Transit has designated up to 10 spaces each at Big Lake, Elk River, Anoka, Coon Rapids and Fridley stations as available only for overnight parking with each car permitted to occupy a space for no longer than seven days at a time.

During the pilot program, Metro Transit will assess usage rates, snow removal issues, vandalism, liability, security and enforcement.

“Assuming these issues are manageable, the overnight parking will be continued until such time as, on a station-by-station basis, the overnight parking spaces are needed by Northstar's prime customers — daily commuters,” said Lamb.



Minnesota Valley Transit Authority ridership down 8 percent to 2.4 million rides in 2009.

Metro Transit ridership expects a decrease from 95 million in 2008 to below 90 million for 2009.

## Bus ridership drops amid lost jobs, lower gas prices

By KATIE HUMPHREY and DAVID PETERSON, *Star Tribune* staff writers

Big transit dreams are shifting into gear in the south metro area, with new stations opening up and construction set to start later this year on Cedar Avenue to make way for bus rapid transit.

Yet the area's most popular bus service, the Minnesota Valley Transit Authority (MVTA), saw its ridership drop 8 percent to 2.4 million rides in 2009.

It's only the second time since MVTA's founding in 1991 that ridership has dropped. Last time, in 2002, the decline paralleled a cut in service.

This time, MVTA officials blame lower gas prices — making it more affordable for people to drive — and the economy. There's also a new Metro Transit service on Interstate 35 competing with MVTA, providing 429 express bus rides per day between Lakeville and Minneapolis.

Dakota County Commissioner Will Branning, chairman of the MVTA board, said the economy is the biggest culprit because job losses have taken many commuters off the roads altogether. And that won't change until the jobs come back.

"If the job market improves, ridership will drastically improve," Branning said.

The drop in south metro transit ridership echoed one that took place all across the Twin Cities, according to preliminary estimates.

After hitting nearly 95 million in 2008, including a 27-year high for Metro Transit, the region's main bus system, ridership throughout the various regional transit systems is expected to sink below 90 million when the final numbers are in, according to figures

released as part of Metropolitan Council Chairman Peter Bell's "State of the Region" address last week.

Both drops are being seen as the result of lost jobs in the metro area, and in particular lost jobs within the inner core — central cities and older, inner-ring suburbs such as Bloomington.

Twin Cities area employment dropped by about 83,000 from 2007 to 2009, according to Libby Starling, research manager for the Metropolitan Council, with the vast majority of those losses — about 76,000 — occurring from 2008 to 2009.

From 2000 to 2009, Starling recently told a Met Council committee, Minneapolis-St. Paul ranked 19th out of the top 25 metro areas in its changing job picture, "meaning one of the biggest losses in jobs. About half the metros saw an increase in jobs during that time."

### Popularity of 'flex routes'

While job losses hurt commuter bus ridership — the bulk of MVTA's business — other types of south metro bus routes saw increases. More riders boarded buses bound for the University of Minnesota, and local "flex routes" serving Apple Valley, Rosemount, Burnsville and Savage also saw an increase.

"There seems to be interest in having that little bit of flexibility to be able to have a bus get closer to where you live," said Robin Selvig, customer service manager for MVTA. "They may take the bus to Cub Foods or the pharmacy, or they may take it to the transit station to get on a bus to go somewhere else."

That interest bodes well for the bus rapid transit destined for Cedar Avenue in 2012, Branning said.

*Bus ridership drop, continued page XX*



## Transit planning suddenly booming in Washington County

Off the map for big projects a few years ago, county now in the driver's seat.

By KEVIN GILES, *Star Tribune*

Not long ago Washington County was far off the beaten path of public transit, but a discussion Tuesday showed how much that's changed.

Studies of three major transit corridors have been launched with a fourth in the works. Transit centers are planned in Woodbury and Newport. Commissioners hold more sway in the metrowide debate over which transit projects should come first and at what cost.

Commissioners met in a workshop to review the county's role in the Counties Transit Improvement Board (CTIB), formed two years ago by five metro counties that assess a quarter-cent sales tax to study and build transit.

Washington County commissioners support spending CTIB money on the current major project, the Central Corridor light-rail train between St. Paul and Minneapolis. But they also expect Ramsey and Hennepin counties to send plenty of CTIB money their way when Washington County's turn comes for a big project.

"We're going to want those deep pockets funding ours," said Commissioner Gary Kriesel.

Washington County has dedicated some of its CTIB receipts to pay for studies of the I-94 corridor east from St. Paul to the St. Croix River. Buses and trains someday could zoom past Oakdale, Woodbury and Lake Elmo depending on study findings and available money.

Meanwhile, a Rush Line route running north from St. Paul and a Red Rock line running south would serve Washington County residents. Planning for those commuter routes, which could include buses or trains or both, has accelerated in the past year. A fourth proposed major commuter line through the county, along Hwy. 36 from Oakdale to Stillwater, awaits a study to determine its feasibility.

Much of the workshop discussion Tuesday centered on Washington County's commitment to bonding for major transit projects funded through CTIB receipts. Commissioners say they're not looking to withdraw from the CTIB arrangement — which also includes Ramsey, Anoka, Hennepin and Dakota counties — but they continue to seek assurance it will work in the county's favor.

Even as transit rolls forward, other projects dear to commissioners' hearts remain stuck. One of those is the proposed St. Croix River Crossing bridge, which would launch from Oak Park Heights on the Minnesota side. That proposal, intended to relieve growing traffic congestion in the Stillwater area, is now estimated to cost at least \$668 million if construction begins in 2013.

### Bus ridership drop, continued...

That service, meant to mimic a light-rail train by running buses along the corridor in a designated shoulder lane, will include multiple local stops along Cedar through Lakeville, Apple Valley and Eagan.

About one-third of MVTA's operating budget comes from fares, and Selvig said the ridership decline isn't expected to have much impact on the agency's \$17.5 million operating budget. But MVTA, which draws funding from the state's motor vehicle

sales tax and other sources, is already operating on a shoestring after spending down reserves and might cut some services later this year.

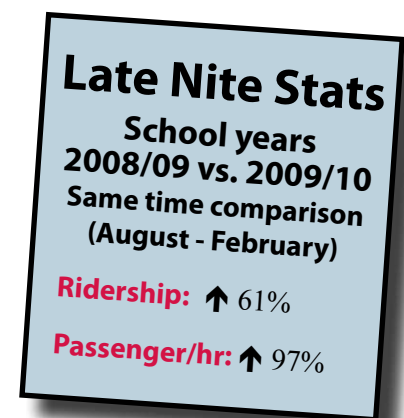
Still, Selvig said, "We're very hopeful."



## St. Cloud's Late Nite ridership jumps

By BERTA HARTIG, St. Cloud Metro Bus

Three years ago St. Cloud State University approached Metro Bus with an idea from its student senate: operate late night bus service to keep students safe when they go out Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights. The service started by with three routes: East, South and West. This year, in an effort to cut costs and provide more frequent service for SCSU students, the service start time was pushed back and the West Route was eliminated. The goal was to focus on the core South Route through the SCSU campus and the East Route. A new "Load and Go" policy also was put in place. This allows students to ride without swiping their IDs after 1:50 a.m., speeding up the load time. This, coupled with marketing efforts of the operations staff to talk with and handout fliers to students before they walk home or get in their cars, has increased ridership.



## DTA transported nearly 3.2 million riders in 2009

By TOM ELWELL, Duluth Transit Authority

Duluth Transit Authority (DTA) ridership for 2009 surpassed the 3 million rider mark for the second consecutive time since 2002. Ridership for 2009, which was down 1.4 percent from 2008, totaled 3,173,485. DTA ridership has steadily improved over the past few years and is up 21.8 percent since 2005.

While transit use is up by all segments of the general population, U-Pass ridership has shown the most consistent gains. The U-Pass program was established in 2000 at UMD and expanded to the College of St. Scholastica (CSS) and Lake Superior College (LSC) in 2001 and University of Wisconsin, Superior (UWS), in 2007. The U-Pass ridership surpassed the 4 million milestone in January 2010. U-Pass ridership at UMD, CSS, LSC and UWS increased by 2.7 percent in 2009 with 712,030 rides.

DTA Bike & Bus ridership for 2009 also surpassed the previous year's total. In its 15th year of operation, the Bike & Bus service transported 22,302 bicycles — up 5.6 percent over last year. For the first time since the Bike & Bus program began 15 years ago, bike racks have remained on buses through the winter months. A study of the winter use will determine if the bike racks will remain on a year-round basis from now on.

STRIDE (Special Transit RIDE) ridership for 2009 also increased by 2.9 percent with 27,290 rides.

DTA ridership gains parallel the national trend. Americans are using public transportation due to volatile gas prices and inflation. Even though fuel prices have subsided since last fall's high, DTA ridership continues to be strong.



## metro council.org

### President's budget includes Central Corridor LTR

President Obama's 2011 budget recommends a Full Funding Grant Agreement and first-year funding of \$45 million for the Central Corridor LRT project. The FTA is expected to approve the project's entry into final design next month and to award the grant by fall. [Read Story](#)

### Technology to improve Metro Mobility service

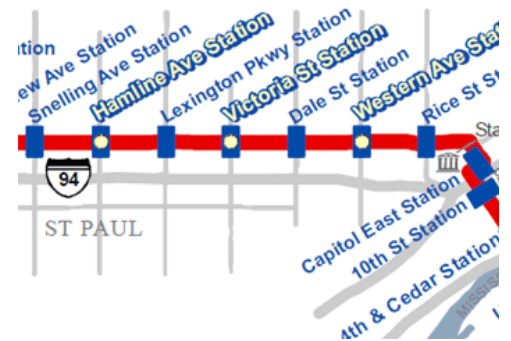
Metro Mobility paratransit service projects an annual ridership increase of 6 percent for the next 10 years. To prepare for the growth, technology will be used to improve operating efficiencies. Besides purchasing Hybrid buses to improve fuel economy, a new online reservation system was launched to allow customers to reserve, cancel and review their trips 24/7. Near future improvements include: Using new computer technology to combine information from multiple paratransit providers; installing on-board cameras, Mobile Data Computers and Automatic Vehicle Locators; completing a phone system upgrade; and implementing an electronic fare payment option. [Read Story](#)

### Central Corridor LRT Line adds three stations

Three more stations will be added to the \$941 million Central Corridor light rail transit (LRT) project, thanks to a relaxation of federal rules and a commitment of additional funds. The Met Council hopes to secure FTA approval to enter final design in March and receive a commitment for 50 percent federal funding by September. Construction of the stations, to be located on University Avenue at Western, Victoria and Hamline avenues, would start this year and be completed by 2014. [Read Story.](#)



Relocation of utilities in downtown St. Paul, in preparation for construction of Central Corridor LRT, began in 2009.



**Northstar rail ridership is higher than expected**  
By AMBAR ESPINOZA, Minnesota Public Radio  
<http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2010/02/23/northstar-numbers-up/>

## Central Corridor Making Tracks News

Central Corridor LRT Update



[Read News](#)

## InTransit Bulletin Board

### RTAP Training Classes

Rural Transit Assistance Program (RTAP) offers training in passenger assistance, defensive driving, abuse prevention along with refresher courses and training for newly hired employees. New hires should take the full eight hours of Passenger Assistance, four hours of Defensive Driving and four hours of Abuse Prevention. Refresher training should be taken once every three years after the initial new hire courses have been completed. View RTAP calendar and register for classes online at [www.dot.state.mn.us/transit/rtap/rtaptrng.html](http://www.dot.state.mn.us/transit/rtap/rtaptrng.html). For more information, contact RTAP Coordinator Lynn Frank at (651)366-4710 or [lynn.frank@dot.state.mn.us](mailto:lynn.frank@dot.state.mn.us).

### Events

**July 24, 2010** Minnesota Statewide Bus Rodeo  
Alexandria

**September 13 -15, 2010** Minnesota Public Transit Conference Rochester, Mayo Civic Center and Radisson/Doubletree

## Send News

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Metropolitan Council Newsletter

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