

intransit

May / June 2014 Edition

Thief River Falls bus service sees big gains

Reprinted with Grand Forks Herald permission.

By KEVIN BONHAM

A bus service that operates in seven northwest Minnesota counties is seeing a big increase in ridership in part because more people are commuting to jobs in Thief River Falls.

To meet demand, Tri-Valley Opportunity Council, a Crookston-based nonprofit group, is adding more routes.

Between 2012 and 2013, Tri-Valley's Rural Transportation Collaborative saw the number of riders go up 37 percent from 86,000 to 118,000, according to program director Cynthia Pic.

The increase largely can be attributed to the commuter bus service Tri-Valley began offering last year from East Grand Forks and Crookston to Digi-Key, a Thief River Falls-based electronics component distributor that employs more than 2,600.

Last month, the agency added Saturday bus service between Crookston and Thief River Falls. This month, it added bus service between Bagley, Minn., and Thief River Falls.

Part of the reason maybe the housing shortage in Thief River Falls, where builders have struggled to keep up with the growing work force at Digi-Key and other employers. Digi-Key is encouraging

workers to use the bus by subsidizing fares.

Tri-Valley is also guaranteeing many of its existing rural route where, in the past, service has been cancelled on occasion, according to Pic.

"We're trying to build better trust in the public transportation system," she said. "If you're scheduling a medical appointment, that route will make the run. We won't drop any routes because of lack of riders."

Besides the routes in East Grand Forks, Crookston and Thief River Falls, Tri-Valley provides weekly or bi-weekly service in Warren, Hendrum, Halstad, Ada, Twin Valley, Hallock and Karlstad.

The group also serves the University of Minnesota-Crookston and the East Grand Forks and Thief River Falls campuses of Northland Community and Technical College.

Tri-Valley has been in the transportation business since 2009. Eighty percent of the funding comes from the state Department of Transportation and the remainder comes from donations and fares.

Visit tvoc.org to learn more!



President's Column

The 2014 Legislative Session is over and while we didn't reach our goal of a major transportation funding package with increased dedicated funding for transit, we made great strides in raising awareness about the importance of transportation and the need for additional dollars.

The Minnesota Public Transit Association join with almost 200 other organizations to form a new campaign called Move MN. The campaign organized and mobilized advocates from all across the state including local government officials to push for passage of a transportation funding bill in 2014 that would provide ongoing increased revenue. The campaign used social media, forums and meetings, paid advertising and earned media coverage to highlight transportation funding needs to raise awareness and help get legislation through the House and Senate Transportation Committees.

Thanks to this push, the governor and legislative leaders have promised to make Transportation Funding a top priority for the 2015 Session. Of course, we need to hold them to this promise and make transportation an issue with all of the candidates for the legislature and for the governor's office.

This fall's campaign will be critical for the future of transit. With strong supporters in the legislature and in the governor's office we believe we can achieve passage of legislation that will provide a significant increase in revenue for transit service statewide. However, if transportation is not a campaign issue, it won't be a legislative issue come January of 2015. With federal transportation funding facing a serious problem in terms of revenue from the federal gas tax declining, action at the state level will be even more important.

MPTA will be working hard this summer and fall to advocate for increased transit funding and we will need your help to make the case. **Stories from bus riders, analysis of system needs and meetings with your local legislators will all make a huge difference. MPTA is here to help you tell your story so that transit service can be expanded.**

Our fall transit conference will be another great venue for raising the profile of transit. This year's Minnesota Public Transit Conference will be held Tuesday, September 9th through Thursday, September 11th at the RiverCentre in St. Paul. It will be an exciting time with the Green Line LRT providing service between Minneapolis and St. Paul. MPTA is working to develop a great conference with important training sessions and updates as well as great experiences that will leave you energized and inspired. Together we can Make Every Connection Matter. Check our web site: www.mpta-transit.org for more details.

As always, we greatly value your membership in MPTA. We're here to serve you. Please let me know how we're doing and how we can improve our association as we fight for all transit systems across the state.

Sincerely,

Marc Hall, President



Legislative Update: 2014

Legislative Session Review

By MARGARET DONAHOE

The 2014 Legislative Session began with a lot of action and expectation for ongoing dedicated revenue to be increased for transit systems throughout the state. House and Senate Transportation committees held joint hearings prior to the start of the session where agency representatives and advocates made a strong case for additional funding needs.

Legislation to increase transit funding by increasing the metropolitan area sales tax for transit and by dedicating more of the revenue from the sales tax on leased motor vehicles was introduced and included in a larger funding package that included a 5% sales tax on motor fuels at the wholesale level. The legislation was passed by both the House and Senate Transportation Committees but did not progress any further in the process.

For transit, the Transportation Funding Package would have provided:

- Approximately \$335 million per year in new revenue from a $\frac{3}{4}$ cent increase in the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area local sales tax for transit. The increased tax levy would have been expanded to the full seven-county metropolitan area and would have been collected by the state rather than the counties. The current $\frac{1}{4}$ cent sales tax for transit would continue to be levied and invested by the five counties that comprise the Counties Transit Improvement Board (CTIB).

While the Metropolitan Council has advocated for a $\frac{1}{2}$ cent increase in the sales tax for transit, the proposal for the larger increase would allow for a 4% increase in bus service, along with accelerated investments in transitways, rather than a 1% increase in bus service with the $\frac{1}{2}$ cent increase.

- Increased revenue from the sales tax on leased motor vehicles (MVLST). Currently, the first \$32 million in revenue raised from this sales tax is deposited in the state's general fund. The legislation would have shifted that \$32 million to transportation instead. The bill that passed out of committee would have split the total MVLST revenue with 60% going to Greater Minnesota Transit and 40% to five metropolitan area counties for highway improvements. The proposal would provide an increase of almost \$20 million per year for transit. MPTA had advocated for a split of 70/30 with 70% of the revenue dedicated to Greater Minnesota transit.

Transit advocates will need to push hard during the coming months for transportation funding to be a higher priority during the 2015 Legislative Session.

State Capital Bonding Bill

This was the traditional bonding year and this year the legislature decided to pass one bill with funding from general obligation bonds and another bill with general fund cash for various infrastructure projects. The bonding bill passed by the legislature and signed by the Governor includes totals \$850 million and **includes \$1.5 million for transit projects in Greater Minnesota.** Of this amount, \$1.1 million is for Phase I of the St. Cloud Metro Bus operations vehicle storage additional and improvements project and \$400,000 to Kandiyohi Area Transit joint powers board for an additional bus storage garage in Willmar.

The bonding bill also includes **\$15 million for transit capital improvements in the Twin Cities Metro Area** to advance projects in accordance with the Transportation Policy Plan and in consultation with CTIB.

Continued on next page

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The appropriation may be used by the Metropolitan Council or for grants to metropolitan area political subdivisions for preliminary engineering, engineering, environmental work, design, right-of-way acquisition, and construction for the Lake Street and I-35W transit station in Minneapolis, and in the following transitway corridors: Bottineau Boulevard, East 7th Street in St. Paul, I-94 Gateway, Penn Avenue North bus rapid transit, Red Line bus rapid transit, Red Rock, Riverview, Robert Street, Rush Line, and Snelling Avenue bus rapid transit.

It is expected that a large share of the \$15 million will be used for the Snelling Avenue bus rapid transit, also known as the A Line.

General Fund Cash Bill

The legislature also passed a separate bill with additional funding for infrastructure projects in light of the general fund surplus projected as part of the February, 2014 budget forecast. The additional \$200 million in cash brings the total for capital investment to over \$1 billion – a threshold that hasn't been surpassed previously.

The cash bill included a one-time appropriation of \$1 million for the Safe Routes to School program.

Supplemental Appropriations Bill

This bill modifies the budgets that were developed last year for many areas of state government in light of the projected budget surplus in the general fund.

Last year, the legislature set a two-year budget for transportation that included a change in the distribution of the sales tax on leased vehicles (MVLST) revenue.

When the law passed in 2008 dedicating some of this funding to transportation, it was structured so that the first \$32 million in revenue was deposited in the general fund and the remaining dollars were split

with 50% going to Greater Minnesota transit and 50% going to 5 of the 7 metro counties for county highway work. Last year the legislature placed a cap of \$9 million for FY2014 and FY205 on the amount of revenue going to the metro counties. That meant that whatever amount of revenue was available after the first \$32 million for the general fund and the \$9 million for metro counties was distributed would be dedicated to Greater Minnesota transit. The legislature anticipated that the amount of revenue remaining for Greater Minnesota transit would be close to \$9 million. Instead, the revenue estimate for MVLST increased dramatically.

Representatives from the counties felt that they were deprived of additional revenue (about \$22 million) that would have gone to the counties if the \$9 million cap had not been put in place. So this year, the legislature removed the cap for FY2015. Removing the cap means a shift in funding of about \$12.6 million from Greater Minnesota transit to the five metro counties. To partially off-set the loss of revenue to Greater Minnesota transit, the legislature provided an additional \$6.5 million in general fund dollars for Greater Minnesota transit for FY2015 in the supplemental budget bill. Greater Minnesota transit also received an appropriation of \$32,000 to help pay for free transit rides on regular route systems on election day in 2014.

The legislation also provides some additional funding for Metropolitan Area Transit as well. An additional \$1 million was included for a Lake St. Bus Rapid Transit station in Minneapolis, \$500,000 for improving transit shelters, \$250,000 for suburban transit providers and \$144,000 to help defray the cost of providing free transit service on election day in 2014.

The bill also includes an ongoing appropriation of \$250,000 for Safe Routes to School.



Legislative Update: 2014

Legislative Session Review

Regional Transit Bonds (RTC)

The first tax bill, which was signed into law by the Governor Dayton in March, includes a two year authorization for regional transit bonds issued by the Metropolitan Council rather than the usual one year authorization, and provides an inflation increase in the second year. The Metropolitan Council received a **two-year bond authorization for up to \$75.3 million** in capital expenditures.

Policy Language

A number of bills contain policy changes impacting transit providers. These policies include:

- Transit Shelters: Establishes requirements for design of transit shelter and maintenance of shelters and stops in the Twin Cities metropolitan area; “transit authority” to include cities, the Metropolitan Council, and opt-outs, for shelters and bus stop locations under their respective jurisdiction or via a vendor contract. Requires transit authorities to create design specifications for transit shelters, which must include appropriate engineering standards, maximized protection from the elements, warming capabilities at high-traffic locations as feasible, and accessibility for persons with disabilities and the elderly. Requires consultation with the Metropolitan Council’s Transportation Accessibility Advisory Committee. Requires transit authorities to maintain transit shelters, including keeping shelters reasonably clean and removing snow and ice.

- Free Transit Service on Election Day: Requires the Metropolitan Council and its contracted service and the suburban transit providers to provide free regular-route transit service on the date of the 2014 state general election. The requirement also applies to Greater Minnesota regular-route transit service. General fund dollars are appropriated for the estimated cost to transit providers.
- Payment Schedule for Greater Minnesota Transit: Gives discretion to the Commissioner to schedule payments of operating assistance to Greater Minnesota transit providers as appropriate, providing that payments must be made quarterly.
- Passenger Rail Definition: Creates a definition of “passenger rail” by reference to federal law and adds “Amtrak” to a list of entities with whom MnDOT is authorized to enter into agreements for passenger rail operation.
- BRT Levy by Regional Rail Authorities: Authorizes the seven metropolitan county regional rail authorities to use taxing power to develop bus rapid transit in transitways that are included in the Metropolitan Council’s 2030 Transportation Policy Plan.



Teaching to Ride Transit in Faribault

Edited by Laura Eash with permission from Amy Repinski, Director of Transportation for Hiawathaland Transit.

One of the projects Hiawathaland Transit has been working on is not only to educate the public about transit options that are available within their community but also how to ride the transit. Often entities/businesses will tell the system that they will hand out a brochure, but these can seem very overwhelming to potential passengers as they contain a large map, tables of stop times, written in other languages, etc. Feedback that is often received states individuals still do not understand how the system works.

A couple of months ago, Hiawathaland Transit partnered with ABE (Adult Basic Education) in Faribault to pilot a project in which ESL classes would contain information on how to read route maps, how the transit operates, general info as far as how much it costs, etc. ESL classes are mandatory for a majority of the assistance programs through Rice County. Those on such programs as financial assistance are required to complete a minimum of five hours of ESL classes per week. In order to further demonstrate how easily the system can be accessed, the students did a field trip day on the route buses in May, shown below.





Greater MN News

Changes to Northstar Link commuter bus went into effect Monday, June 2nd. Fares have been lowered with the eventual goal of riders being able to pay for the bus (which connects St. Cloud and Big Lake) and Northstar train (which connects Big Lake and Minneapolis) all at once. Also, the bus route has been expanded to include St. Cloud State University.

- *MPR News*

The merger of the Kandiyohi County and Renville County transit systems, Kandiyohi Area Transit and Renville County Heartland Express respectively, is moving forward and is expected to occur by January 1, 2015.

- *West Central Tribune*

Saint Peter Transit will be replacing two of its four existing vehicles with new buses that include improved air conditioning systems, security cameras, LED signs and space for two wheelchairs per vehicle.

- *Saint Peter Herald*

Use of the Greater Mankato Bus System has almost doubled in the last five years thanks to several initiatives including route changes and increased social media presence.

- *Mankato Free Press*

St. Cloud Metro Bus CNG Project



By Laura Eash with information and photo provided by St. Cloud Metro Bus.

The ribbon cutting for the St. Cloud Metro Bus compressed natural gas (CNG) project was held the morning of Friday, May 16th at the Metro Bus Operations Center. St. Cloud Metro Bus is now the first Minnesotan public transit provider to operate a CNG-fueled bus fleet, which is comprised of 23 35-foot New Flyer Xcelsior buses that replaced older buses and use CNG as their primary fuel.

St. Cloud Metro Bus is also first in the state to have a public transit CNG fueling facility. A compressor compound and fueling station were constructed and modifications to the maintenance and storage facility were made.

Metro Bus has a total operational fleet of 67 buses, and as more fixed route and paratransit buses are replaced, additional CNG buses will join the fleet. Metro Bus estimates a savings of \$300,000/year over the first decade thanks for lower fueling expenses.

Project partners include Wendel Companies and Xcel Energy. St. Cloud Metro Bus spent \$8 million on construction and renovation and \$10.2 million on new buses. Funding came from three outside sources: A \$3.35 million U.S. Department of Transportation Clean Fuels grant, a \$7.8 million MnDOT grant and a local revenue bond.

**July 11th
and 12th
Visit MPTA's
website for
details!**





News



Bus Service Will Strengthen Connections to METRO Green Line

By METROPOLITAN COUNCIL

Bus service enhancements that strengthen connections to the METRO Green Line went into effect when the new light-rail line opened on Saturday, June 14.

Major changes involve 17 routes that connect with Green Line stations or provide nearby service - including new Route 83 on Lexington Parkway. Customers will benefit from more frequent connecting bus trips, expanded hours, seven-day-a-week service and faster, more direct routes to Green Line stations and major destinations in the Central Corridor. More than a third of customers who will ride Green Line trains are expected to transfer to or from buses.

Schedules for the METRO Green Line and all connecting bus service are posted at metrotransit.org. Additional information is available at metrotransit.org/green-line-buses in multiple languages.



Target Field Station opened May 17th. The facility serves as both a central, multi-modal transportation hub and a community gathering space in downtown Minneapolis.

Photo Credit: Eric Wheeler



Metro Transit Staff Win Northern Lights Awards

From DREW KERR, METRO TRANSIT

Metro Transit recently took home five awards for communications and marketing projects entered in the Northern Lights Awards contest, which is judged by Minnesota communications professionals. The annual competition, sponsored by the Minnesota Association of Government Communicators, recognizes outstanding work in communications and marketing by public agencies. This year's contest drew 157 entries, with 83 recognized with an Award of Excellence (the top award in a category) or Award of Merit.

Metro Transit's award-winning projects were:

- ◆ 2012 Metro Transit Factbook earned an Award of Excellence in the Annual Reports category. It also was nominated for Best of Show.

Public Relations Manager **John Siqveland** was project manager, with **Leah Janz** the graphic designer.

- ◆ *Rider's Almanac* won an Award of Excellence in the Periodical Electronic Publications Category. Public Relations Specialist **Drew Kerr** was project manager, with video support from Digital Communications Specialist **Eric Wheeler**. Kerr also won an Award of Excellence in the Writing – Blog Post category for *Rider's Almanac*.
- ◆ Rail~Volution conference video received an Award of Excellence in the Video – Promotional or Commercial category. Market Development Specialist **Anj Olsen** was project manager.
- ◆ Rail~Volution conference logo won an Award of Merit in the Visual Design (Logo) category. Janz was designer.

From left: Anj Olsen, John Siqveland, Leah Janz, Drew Kerr and Eric Wheeler.





News

MVTA Earns APTA Certificate of Merit for Innovative Safety Program

From ROBIN SELVIG, MVTA

The American Public Transportation Association (APTA) has announced the 2014 winners of its Safety and Security Awards program. In the category "Fewer than 4 million passenger trips annually" MVTA was selected to receive a Certificate of Merit for creating "a travel-training program that goes beyond the classroom to conduct excursions and safety training for older adults a group that is projected to represent 20 percent of the local population in the next 10 years."

The APTA Bus Safety & Security Excellence Awards recognize public transportation organizations for their innovative and proactive programs dedicated to improving safety and security for their employees, passengers, and the public. The top honor is the GOLD Award, which is given to agencies with the best overall bus safety or bus security program selected by an independent panel of judges. A Certificate of Merit is given to public transit systems in recognition of exceptional achievement in safety or security.

The MVTA safety program focused on helping Apple Valley seniors feel comfortable riding transit following the opening of the METRO Red Line. In September 2013, MVTA was asked to make a presentation at the Apple Valley Senior Center. The MVTA is happy to make these presentations, and at the end of the information session, an offer is made to travel with a group to ensure their success on the first ride.

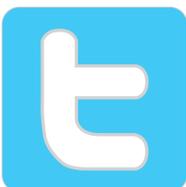
This is the program that was described to APTA, with the innovative nature being the very personal approach and Oct. 24, 2013 ride with the group of 15 seniors on the METRO Red Line from the Apple Valley Transit Station to the Mall of America where riders transferred to the Blue Line to downtown Minneapolis where they enjoyed lunch. After lunch the group made the return trip to Apple Valley.



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Like Minnesota Public Transit Association on Facebook and follow @MNPublicTransit on Twitter for:



- Coverage of MPTA events, including the MN Bus Rodeo in July**
- News and retweets from MPTA members**
- Local and national media coverage of transit news and issues**

MnDOT Office of Transit Holds Spring Workshop

Submitted By LORA BENNETT

At the MnDOT Office of Transit Spring Workshop in April, the ice breaker was to tell your name, transit agency, and what you like about your job. Some teasing ensued about a certain person not liking their job. Day two of the workshop, the ice breaker was these ladies showing up and pronouncing the love for their job.



Robyn Schwer, Renville Co. Heartland Express; Rachel Schneiderman, Renville Co. Heartland Express; Tom Gottfried, MnDOT Office of Transit; Donna Anderson, Meeker Co. Public Transit



Rachel Schneiderman, Renville Co. Heartland Express; Robyn Schwer, Renville Co. Heartland Express; Donna Anderson, Meeker Co. Public Transit. Thanks to Beth Heinrich and Donna Anderson for the photos!

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PRELIMINARY SCHEDULE

Tuesday, September 9th

- 12:30 to 4:00 pm - Training Sessions
 - ◇ Developing a 5-year Plan for Your Transit System
 - ◇ Diversity
- 4:30 pm - MPTA Meeting/Awards
- 6:30 pm - Welcome Reception

Wednesday, September 10th

- 7:00 to 8:00 am - Breakfast
- 8:00 to 8:45 am - Welcoming Remarks - Mayor Coleman, and Marc Hall, MPTA President
- 8:45 to 9:30 am - Keynote Speaker: **Laugh Trip: Manage Your On- and Off-Road Stress with Laughter** - *Jody Ross*
- 10:15 am to noon - Concurrent Sessions
- Noon to 3:30 pm - Lunch and Vendor Expo with Special Exhibitions and Presentations
- 3:30 to 5:30 pm - **Tour of METRO Green Line Light Rail Transit and Union Depot**
- 6:00 pm - First Transit Hospitality Event

Thursday, Sept 11th

- 7:30 am - Breakfast
- 8:00 to 8:45 am - Opening Speaker
- 9:00 to 10:30 am - Concurrent Sessions
- 10:45 am to noon - Concurrent Sessions
- 12:30 pm - Lunch with speaker



Jody Ross



Thanks for joining us at



Transit funding panel at CTAA

Special Thanks to Our InTransit Contributors

- Lora Bennett, MnDOT Office of Transit
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- Drew Kerr, Metro Transit
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Send submissions for the next *InTransit* to Laura: laura_eash@mpta-transit.org