

A bimonthly newsletter published by the Minnesota Public Transit Association.



January 2017 Edition

Mark Your Calendar: 2017 MPTA Events

Transportation Day at the Capitol

February 16th

St. Paul, MN

MN Statewide Bus Roadeo

July 14th and 15th

Fergus Falls, MN

MPTA Conference and Expo

October 16th to 18th

St. Cloud, MN

Vendor Expo Tuesday, October 17th

Visit mpta-transit.org/events for Transportation Day registration information and hotel details for the Roadeo and annual conference!

President's Column

Craig Rempp



MPTA is working harder this year to work for you. Having a strong association allows transit systems to reach consensus on important issues, advocate for more resources and speak out for the thousands of riders who rely on our services every day. We're doing more to reach out to systems, to reach to the Office of Transit and the Metropolitan Council and to reach out to legislators.

As a transit system manager, I know how hard it is to find the time to be an advocate for transit. Between dealing with vehicle break-downs and daily crises as well as the reams of paperwork, it's tough to attend meetings or answer surveys. But all of us depend on the support of community leaders, agency heads and each other as we work to meet the needs of our riders. Sometimes speaking out and providing feedback can be among the most important aspects of our jobs. With better information, better communication and a stronger presence, we can increase our ability to secure needed resources and provide better transit service. So please work with us when we ask for your input or ask you to attend a meeting or conference. Together, we can make a big difference for each system.



The 2017 Legislative Session will once again focus on transportation funding. How transit fits into that agenda is still a little murky. One thing I know – if the train is leaving the station, we better be on it. Transportation bills can be few and far between. The last major increase in ongoing revenue for transportation was signed into law in 2008. With both houses of the legislature under GOP control, it's likely that some kind of bill will be passed and forwarded to the governor. We can help shape how transit funding fits into whatever bill is developed if we agree on what we need and if we are vocal and active.

Join us for Transportation Day at the Capitol on February 16th in St. Paul. This is your opportunity to meet new legislators, new Transportation Committee Chairs and see the newly remodeled State Capitol building. It will be a great experience and an important event for keeping transportation a priority issue at the legislature. Visit our web site to sign up: mpta-transit.org

MPTA will help make advocacy easy. We will make appointments for you with your legislators in St. Paul and will help make arrangements for meetings back home at your facility as well. MPTA can help with messaging, with the latest information and with tips on effective communication. This is an important year for you to make sure that local legislators understand transit service in your area, what the needs are and how they can meet their constituents' mobility challenges.

We're here for you so please ask for assistance and provide your input as the year goes on.

As always, contact me at any time with questions, comments or concerns: craig.rempp@co.isanti.mn.us

Craig Rempp

MPTA President



Legislative Report

Margaret Donahoe

The 2017 Legislative Session is in full swing and transportation funding remains a top priority for many legislators and the leadership. We need to push hard to keep the attention on transportation needs and insist that new funding be enacted into law.

With so many new legislators and new committee members, the first couple of weeks of the session have focused on informational hearings so that legislators have a better understanding of the issues facing the transportation system and how the current funding streams are organized.

Senate GOP Majority (34-33) – Majority Leader **Paul Gazelka** Top Priorities: *Health Care Reform, Tax reform, Transportation funding* that is long-term but uses existing revenue.

Transportation Finance and Policy – 15 Members (9-6 GOP-DFL)

Senator Scott Newman Chair

Senator John Jasinski Vice Chair

Senator Bruce Anderson

Senator Dan Hall

Senator Scott Jensen

Senator Mary Kiffmeyer

Senator David Osmek

Senator David Senjem

Senator Torrey Westrom

Senator Scott Dibble Ranking Member

Senator Jim Carlson

Senator Melissa Franzen

Senator Nick Frentz

Senator Susan Kent

Senator Matt Little

House GOP Majority (76-57 with Special Election Feb. 14th) - **Kurt Daudt**, Speaker of the House Top Priorities: *Health care, passing the state budget and tax reform*. After stating earlier that the House would not consider a bonding bill in 2017, he has since said that it will be up to the caucus but it will probably be a small bonding bill. For transportation, Rep. Daudt is optimistic that a bill can be passed and understands that a funding cliff is coming so it's more important to get a bill passed.

House Transportation Finance Committee ([23 Members](#))

Rep. Paul Torkelson, Chair

Rep. John Petersburg, Vice Chair

Rep. Frank Hornstein, Ranking Member

House Transportation and Regional Governance Policy ([15 Members](#))

Rep. Linda Runbeck, Chair

Rep. Jon Koznick, Vice Chair

Rep. Connie Bernardy, Ranking Member

In the area of transit, the legislature will need to include appropriations for transit operations as part of the biennial transportation budget bill. Greater Minnesota transit is carrying forward a budget balance and is benefitting from higher than anticipated revenue from the sales tax on leased vehicles. However, increasing costs and the need to significantly increase service in the next few years will require planning for a future with larger transit budgets.

Legislative Report

Margaret Donahoe



For Metropolitan Area transit, the Metropolitan Council is projecting an operating deficit of \$89 million due to lower than anticipated MVST revenue and lower ridership. Despite posting the third-highest ridership in over three decades, Metro Transit's 2016 numbers still took a dip from the previous year.

Metro Transit said they provided more than 82.6 million rides in 2016. That's down about 4 percent from 2015, which featured the highest ridership since 1981. Metro Transit cited low gas prices and the prolonged closure of Nicollet Mall as contributors to the drop in riders.

Another development that is changing the political equation for a transportation funding bill is the potential dissolution of the Counties Transit Improvement Board (CTIB).

The members of the Counties Transit Improvement Board (Anoka, Dakota, Hennepin, Ramsey and Washington Counties) are exploring the voluntary dissolution of the joint powers board for the purpose of securing needed funding for the priority transit and transportation projects within these counties. Under current law, counties that are participating in CTIB (currently five counties) are authorized to impose a ¼ percent sales tax for transit expansion. Under a different statute, every county not participating in CTIB (currently 82 counties) may impose a higher tax, up to a ½ cent sales tax for roads, bridges and transit. Twenty-six counties already use some or all of this sales tax authority.

If the five counties no longer participate in CTIB, they would be eligible to use the statute that the other 82 counties are able to use to increase the ¼ cent sales tax for either transit or roads on a county by county basis or with some of the counties acting together. This means that potentially Hennepin and Ramsey and other CTIB counties would be able to raise the funding necessary to cover the state share of major LRT projects like the Southwest LRT or Bottineau LRT lines. These projects (which have been controversial at the legislature) would then be able to move forward to secure a full funding grant agreement with the FTA without any state legislation needed.

In order to dissolve CTIB, each Board of a member County must vote in favor of terminating the existing Joint Powers Agreement. To assure continuation of the CTIB Program of Projects after dissolution, this termination will require a series of actions about the future of the local sales tax and its use for current and planned projects. The transition could be complete by mid-year 2017.

As this issue of In Transit is being written, we have not yet seen the Governor's budget recommendations. We do know that his recommendations for a capital bonding bill did not include any general obligation bonds for transitways or other transit capital.

With a projected \$1.4 billion surplus in the general fund, the legislature will need to decide the level of funding for roads, bridges, transit and other modes and how much of that funding should come from dedicated user fees and how much from the state's general fund. The Minnesota Public Transit Association is seeking a statutory dedication of 100% of the sales tax on leased vehicles with 50% of that dedicated to Greater Minnesota transit. In addition, MPTA is seeking increased funding for transit service in the Twin Cities Metropolitan area including Suburban Transit service.

With increased attention to the ongoing shortfall in meeting the needs on Minnesota's transportation system, this is an important year for action to permanently increase funding for transit across the state.



Join Us -
and see the Newly Restored Capitol Building
Transportation Day at the Capitol
February 16, 2017



REGISTER TODAY:

mpta-transit.org

The 2017 Legislative Session Top Priorities:

- Transportation Funding
- Tax Reform
- Capital Bonding Bill

New Legislators, New Committee Chairs, New Opportunities

***Join your colleagues from around the state and help us
get a long-term transportation funding bill passed!***

This is your opportunity to hear from Key Lawmakers as well as meeting directly with your legislators. **We make it easy!** We will make appointments for you and provide all the information you need.

With Your Participation - We Can Get It Done in 2017!

Metro Bus releases results of annual food drive

Submitted by BERTA HARTIG

Nearly \$2,500 and over 2,400 pounds of food were collected during the Jolly Trolley food drive hosted by St. Cloud Metro Bus in December 2016. Metro Bus partnered with Royal Tire and Townsquare Media to collect donations for local food shelves.

Since the winter drive began in 2011, more than 18,000 pounds and over \$9,600 has been collected. This year's cash donations were up 12 percent over last year.

"We were pleased to see the increase in cash donations," said Ryan Daniel, CEO of Metro Bus. "Using the Second Harvest Food Bank, food shelves are able to get 3-5 times more food than we can purchase as individuals. That, combined with the Charity Challenge matching grant, could give \$2,500 the purchasing power of \$15,000-\$25,000!"

The food drive benefitted Catholic Charities Emergency Services, Salvation Army and Promise Neighborhood.



Volunteers from Metro Bus, Royal Tire and Townsquare Media collected 1.2 tons of non-perishable food and nearly \$2,500 during the annual mobile food drive hosted by Metro Bus. The cash donations have the opportunity to be matched through the local Charity Challenge grant.

DTA's Grocery Express Program Evolves to Meet Community Needs

Submitted by HEATH HICKOK

Access to healthy food sources is a benefit that many of us take for granted. However, the traditional mom and pop stores, located on neighborhood street corners that carried the essentials for a well-stocked pantry have long since vanished. In their place we now have the neighborhood convenience store selling gasoline and snack food. Big grocery chains now dominate the market and their locations are planned for easy access by automobile. However, grocery shopping without access to a car now requires prior planning, and in many cases a trip on public transit.

For those using public transit, shopping for fresh produce and healthy foods can be a challenge. Among those challenges are; how far away is the store, how many bags can be taken on the bus, will my frozen foods thaw before I reach home? In those cases, where a neighborhood has no local outlet for fresh produce and healthy food choices, the term "Food Desert" has been coined.

In mid-2012, the Lincoln Park neighborhood of Duluth was identified as a Food Desert by the Fair Food Access (FFA) Committee, a group that had been working to resolve the Food Desert issue in Duluth for several years.

The FFA partners include: Duluth LISC, the Zeitgeist Center for Arts & Community, CHUM, Community Action Duluth and The Duluth Community Garden Program. The DTA and Miner's, Inc. (Super One) were brought into the group's collaboration on efforts to resolve the transportation barrier component of the Food Desert issue.

The concept of a "Grocery Express" bus service was discussed and the current program has evolved since its inception in September, 2015. The Grocery Express began as fixed bus route that ran once a week, every Tuesday through the Lincoln Park and Morgan Park neighborhoods of Duluth, providing direct service to a bus stop located near the entrance of Super One in West Duluth.

Through a partnership with Miner's Inc., the DTA's Grocery Express has been able to board and alight passengers directly in front of the West Duluth Super One. With this store front stop, passengers have been able to easily access the Super One store and all of the fresh grocery options within.

The bus used for the Grocery Express route is equipped with a ramp system that enables passengers to board with a full cart of groceries. Passengers can then store their grocery items in plastic bins that were installed as a customized rack system with three levels on the bus.

After the initial 4-month pilot, The DTA Board of Directors agreed to extend the program an additional 6 months. Ridership has been consistent, though the numbers have not met the standards established by the DTA for it to be viable as a permanent route. After receiving feedback from onboard and community surveys, the FFA Committee and the DTA decided to adjust the service model to better fit the needs of the community.

In September of 2016, the Grocery Express began offering service on both Tuesdays and Saturdays. The idea was to give citizens who work weekdays the opportunity to grocery shop on the weekend, with the benefit of the special Grocery Express bus. The results have been mixed with an average of 25 to 30 passengers a week using the Saturday service. This is in comparison to the average ridership of 35 to 40 passengers a week on Tuesdays. However, these numbers are still considered as unsustainable by the DTA's route performance measurers.



News



In a further effort to establish a larger passenger base, and still maintain the direct service to the major grocery outlet, the DTA Operations Department has developed a plan for integrating the direct service to the West Duluth Super One by adjustments to its regular route service. This adjustment would be made to the current Route 1 and would provide an increase in trip frequency to the Super One store, while decreasing operating costs that were associated with the dedicated Grocery Express bus.

In order to maintain service frequency along the Grand Avenue corridor in West Duluth, the DTA utilizes the interlining of 3 routes, known as the West Mainline. The West Mainline service includes Route 1 which travels along Third Street in Lincoln Park and Grand Avenue in West Duluth. The route terminates at the Lake Superior Zoo in West Duluth where the bus then turns around to either go back to the new Duluth Transportation Center in downtown or deadheads to the DTA garage.

The new service model created by the DTA Schedule Department will convert the Route 1 buses that are now deadheading to the garage to Grocery Express buses. This change will increase the schedule to daily service as well as trip frequency to the Super One store while eliminating the expense of the dedicated service which was operating only 2 days per week.

This new Grocery Express service will provide 6 trips a day Monday through Friday to the West Duluth Super One. This is an increase from 4 trips on Tuesday and only 3 trips on Saturday. However, because the change will utilize existing service, it will actually be a decrease of 6.3 hours of service a week and save the DTA approximately \$2,400 a month.

Moreover, because these trips are mid-day, the run times will accommodate passengers loading and unloading groceries. The buses will be regular route, and although the special multi-tiered storage rack will no longer be available, the DTA has taken the steps of providing two storage bins on all DTA buses mounted near the front of the passenger compartment.

Due to the increase in frequency of service, the DTA will discontinue the direct store front stop, and will instead board and alight passengers on an adjacent public street at a new stop that is approximately 240 feet from the current stop. The DTA will install a new bus shelter and cart coral at this location.

The one negative of the new service model is the elimination of service to the Morgan Park neighborhood. However, passenger counts determined that ridership on the Morgan Park section of the Grocery Express service was not of a significant number to justify continued service to that area. Further, Morgan Park residents can utilize the DTA's Route 2 to access groceries at a new Whole Foods Co-op located on Grand Avenue.

In addition to the Grocery Express service, the DTA now promotes eleven "Grocery Routes" that are regular fixed-routes that stop within a city block of a grocery store. The DTA's 2017 Rider Guide lists the Grocery Routes and features a new GIS transit system map that identifies grocery stores along the routes. As previously mentioned, The DTA has also installed plastic bins near the front of each regular-route bus that will accommodate the storage of grocery bags while in-transit.

Public Transit can play a pivotal role in addressing a community need. The DTA's Grocery Express program has addressed a need in the Duluth community relating to food deserts. By partnering with both the nonprofit and private sectors, the DTA is part of a sustainable effort that has a buy-in from all stakeholders. The Grocery Express program has evolved from its inception through input from passengers and citizens and by analyzing ridership data. This empirical data has assisted in making both operational and marketing decisions for the program.

At the DTA we believe it is our responsibility to utilize public resources in a cost-effective way while working towards the accomplishment of recognized community needs. It is our mission to provide public transit service that is safe, convenient, efficient and affordable. The Grocery Express program is a great example of a partnership that has evolved to work for everyone involved, in particular the citizens we serve.



At Jim Heilig's retirement party, the DTA Board of Directors presented a plaque to Dennis Jensen (in grey) that will be installed at the DTC. The facility's name will be the Dennis E. Jensen Duluth Transportation Center.

MPTA Members in the News

Hiawathaland Transit

Hiawathaland to start bus service in Lonsdale on January 30th - Lonsdale News Review

Prairie Lakes Transit

Transit system rebounds - Fairmont Sentinel

MVTA Completes Successful First Annual “Stuff the Bus!” Campaign with Nearly Three Tons of Food

Submitted by ROBIN SELVIG

The Minnesota Valley Transit Authority (MVTA) delivered nearly three tons (5,720 pounds) of foodstuffs to 360 Communities in Burnsville and CAP Agency in Shakopee on December 9th following a two-week campaign to collect items for local food shelves. In addition, MVTA received \$1,358 in cash from farebox collections and a generous donation from Schmitt and Sons Transit. The contributions were also divided between the two agencies.

“We are very pleased with our first-year Stuff the Bus! effort,” said Luther Wynder, MVTA Executive Director. “And, we couldn’t not have had better project partners: Schmitt and Sons Transit, 360 Communities and CAP Agency. Community support was also terrific with contributions from local Boy Scouts (Prior Lake/Savage), Shakopee Cub Foods and Eagan Kick-Start Rotary among many other smaller contributions.”

The contributions to 360 Communities will help stock their network of five food shelves in Dakota County (Apple Valley, Burnsville, Farmington, Lakeville and Rosemount) and help ensure that families in need will not go hungry during this holiday season.

Scott County’s CAP Agency operates a food shelf in Shakopee and this donation should help brighten the holidays for more families who are live on little.

Schmitt and Sons Transit Project Manager Connie Massengale said, “This is a great way to involve bus operators, riders and the entire community in a critically needed activity. Schmitt and Sons was pleased to provide the bus and driver for this promotion,” she said.



FTA Recognizes Three Outstanding Rural Transit Agencies

Submitted by MITCH BAKKEN and edited by LAURA EASH—News Release Courtesy of FTA

The U.S. DOT's Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Acting Administrator Carolyn Flowers announced in October 2016 three Administrator's Awards for Outstanding Public Transportation Service in Rural Public Transportation. The announcement was made at the 22nd National Rural and Intercity Bus Conference in Asheville, NC.

Since 1985, FTA has recognized great work in rural transit by presenting Administrator's Awards for Outstanding Public Transportation Service in Rural Public Transportation. This year's awards seek to recognize rural transit providers that improved the mobility of Americans in rural areas and enhanced access to employment, healthcare, and community services.



From left to right: Cindy Pic (Tri-Valley Transportation Programs Director), Carolyn Flowers (Acting Administrator of the Federal Transit Administration), Elizabeth Hensrud (Tri-Valley Transportation Fleet Maintenance Coordinator)

"This year's awardees have worked to address geographic gaps in services, partnered with other organizations to expand access and made a special effort to serve people with low incomes, seniors, and persons with disabilities," said FTA Acting Administrator Flowers. "These transit agencies are an excellent example of how public transportation can not only connect people to jobs, medical care and other important services, but also to improve quality of life."

The work done by these and other agencies will only become more important in the near future, as both population and demand for reliable transit are expected to grow significantly. The FAST Act, passed last year, provides steady and predictable funding for five years with an increase of \$1 billion over MAP-21 levels for the total FTA transit program.

The top three rural transit providers that were recognized by the FTA are: Durango Transit, (Durango, CO), Barry County Transit, (Hastings, MI), and Tri-Valley Heartland Express (Crookston, MN). Known as THE BUS, in 2015 Tri-Valley Heartland Express, Crookston, MN provided 187,455 passenger rides covering 543,480 square miles in eight northwestern Minnesota counties. Tri-Valley supports "Rides to Wellness" by offering transit access to healthcare and other community support activities. Their headquarters facility is a pick up location for food for low income families through a local partnership; Tri-Valley works with a homeless shelter in Crookston, MN to transport families to Grand Forks, ND, to an event where resources are provided for them; and they have contracted with several healthcare systems and facilities to provide rides for clients and patients.

New management system promotes efficiency, engagement

Submitted by DREW KERR and edited by LAURA EASH

When an employee is out on a long-term absence, they're supposed to connect with their manager every 30 days. New hires going through probation have numerous check-ins. And when accidents occur, there are several reports to complete.

For managers who may be responsible for up to 70 employees, keeping track of these and many other steps can be arduous. But a new management system is helping them stay on top of all the moving pieces.

In use for more than a year, the iDash system serves as a "one stop shop" that automatically prompts supervisors and managers to schedule employee meetings, file a report or complete other required tasks.

The system also provides easy access to general employee information and forms frequently-used by management.

"Ultimately, this is going to be the best tool a manager has," said Heywood Assistant Transportation Manager Bobby Andress, who was among those who helped test and improve the system when it was introduced.

The automatic prompts are an important way to maintain consistency and help managers focus on coaching and counseling instead of searching for information.

"The whole idea is to keep things from flying under the radar and to help our managers spend more time engaging with their employees," said Brian Funk, Deputy Chief of Operations-Bus.

Currently, Bus Transportation, Bus Maintenance and Rail Transportation use the system to manage ATU employees. The system may expand to other divisions and employee groups over time.

Among the features that continues to evolve is a way to use iDash to get a complete picture of an employee's work history, including service awards, commendations and training.

"iDash will really help managers see the whole story quickly," said Christine Kuennen, Assistant Director-Bus Administration. "Where it could have taken hours or even days to compile a complete profile, we can now do that in a few clicks."

Access to employee information is restricted to managers and supervisors and is based on their specific roles.

There were no available products that could provide the kind of service Metro Transit required, so iDash was custom-built by staff. Kuennen leads the project with help from Joe Reichstadt, Assistant Director-Bus Maintenance.

Information Services and Human Resources have also been closely involved throughout the life of the project, building a common understanding and vision that has been critical to the project's success.

The Information Service lead is Project Manager Carolyn Harris. Information Services Manager Sue Stroinski was the lead through mid-2015.

With early positive results, the group is busily working to expand on what iDash can do.

In the future, Bus Maintenance would like to use iDash to track fleet maintenance activities. Data collected through iDash will also help identify trends and ways to streamline business processes, reduce costs and improve results.



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Ridership ebbs, but long-term trends remain in our favor

By BRIAN LAMB and edited by LAURA EASH

At the end of 2015, we celebrated our highest ridership in three decades and were among just a handful of U.S. transit agencies that saw an annual increase in ridership. But it became increasingly clear over the course of 2016 that the momentum we've been building as our ridership has grown over the last decade is facing some headwinds.

Ultimately, we ended 2016 with 82.6 million rides, about 4 percent below 2015's total and short of our year-end goal. The largest drop-off was seen in our bus ridership, which has declined each of the last three years.

Looking at our annual ridership is a good way to benchmark our progress, and a decrease is certainly cause for some concern. But that concern shouldn't turn to alarm.

Our ridership has grown in nine of the last 11 years. Other than the last two years, 2016's ridership was higher than any other year since 1981, when gas prices peaked amid a national energy crisis.

And while our overall ridership declined, there were several bright spots. Ridership on the METRO Green Line increased for the second straight year, finishing with 12.7 million rides and average weekday ridership at a level we hadn't expected to see for another 15 years. Our region's first rapid bus line, the A Line, had a tremendous start. Around 830,000 rides were taken in the service's first six months of operation and ridership on the corridor it serves has increased by about a third since the line opened.

A renewed emphasis on our High Frequency Network — routes with service every 10 to 15 minutes — brought promising early results. After being added to the High Frequency Network last spring, ridership on Route 11 increased about 10 percent.

And we reached two new milestones in 2016, setting a new single-day ridership record in September and providing the most express and regular route rides to the Minnesota State Fair in our history.

These successes show a strong and growing demand for transit in our region. But they don't tell the whole story. ? Last year's gas prices, a leading influencer of transit ridership, were about half what they were in 2013. Our research suggests that a \$1 decline in gas prices leads to more than 300,000 lost bus rides each month, or around 3.6 million rides a year. A recent housing boom near the University of Minnesota has also allowed students to live in such close proximity to campus they simply don't need transit to reach many of their destinations. The growing popularity of ridesharing services, telecommuting and urban living are also changing travel habits in ways we and other transit agencies are still adapting to.

These and other changes will continue to confront us in the future. Even so, there are plenty of reasons to believe our ridership can continue to grow. Gas prices have begun to rise. Buses are due to return to Nicollet Mall by the end of this year. Efforts to extend our light rail lines, introduce more rapid bus service and provide seamless connections between our system and other alternatives to driving alone are moving forward. And there remains this indisputable fact: our region is growing with each passing year and we simply can't build enough roads for everyone to drive all the time. If we take the long view, we'll see that we're moving in the right direction and will continue to do so for years to come.



Upcoming Events

MN Statewide Bus Rodeo

July 14th and 15th

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St. Cloud, MN

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