

The Central Corridor Light Rail: Re-envisioning Transit Culture in Minneapolis/St. Paul

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June 2, 2010

Introduction

Like so many metropolitan regions in the United States, Minneapolis and St. Paul face an existential dilemma: as their urban populations continue to steadily grow, how can they change an auto-centric transit culture into a sustainable one capable of transporting people efficiently and meeting the needs of twenty-first century cities? It is a question without easy answers, and certainly not without controversy. However, with the expansion of the Twin Cities into fifth-ring suburbs and the ever increasing length of commutes in the region, it became clear in the late 1990s that a new overarching strategy was needed to address the cities' long-standing transportation problems.

That strategy was eventually released as a transportation master plan, which incorporated years of regional studies and feedback from residents. MSP and its regional planning body, the Metropolitan Council, have chosen to build on top of the existing transit system by adding new options and improving infrastructure. Some options were relatively obvious and widely supported, like adding new lanes to highways. Other options like light rail transit and commuter trains, though,

have become sites of immense disagreement. This paper will look at how a large metropolitan region like MSP adapted to a new transportation model and how the regional dynamics played out in a large light rail transit project known as the Central Corridor.

I will begin this paper by discussing the history of Minneapolis and St. Paul, along with its regional planning agency, the Metropolitan Council. Then, I will discuss the current transportation outlook for the region, analyzing some of the major solutions offered by the players. From there, I will discuss the design and current status of one particular solution: the Central Corridor light rail project to connect Minneapolis and St. Paul together through mass transit. This project has had relatively strong success so far, but it has also been buffeted by its fair share of controversies. I will discuss how this rail project embodies the changing nature of transportation in the region and what can be learned from the project. Finally, I will look at the BART Expansion to SFO International Airport in the Bay Area and how the Central Corridor and the BART expansion compare in terms of regional cooperation and dynamics.

Essential Background

Minneapolis and St. Paul were established roughly with the founding of Minnesota in the mid-1850s. Originally a frontier outpost for individuals traveling west, the two cities would quickly develop themselves into regional economic powerhouses. Fueled by the St. Anthony Falls, Minneapolis would quickly become the world leader in flour production, and St. Paul became a major site of commerce and politics as the state capital. Due to the importance of Minnesota's exports, the state was swiftly linked into the growing web of railroads extending from the East and these connections helped to link the region with the major Midwest market of

Chicago. The two cities have followed the trends of typical American urban areas, developing an urban core and suburban rings with the rise of the automobile and the postwar boom in the 1950s.¹ The region remains economically competitive with twenty-one Fortune 500 companies, and it is a major site for finance, advertising and the life sciences.² Today Minneapolis has 390,131 residents and St. Paul has 287,151. Altogether, there are 3.5 million people living in the seven-county metro region.

Regional transportation planning can prove to be exceptionally challenging due to the intricate incentives of different players involved in the planning process. The rapidly declining quality of social services during the 1960s led to a strong demand from citizens and politicians to find a new approach, and this movement would ultimately lead to the creation of the Metropolitan Council in 1967. Despite initial proposals to make the council democratic, the final proposal passed by the legislature called for sixteen council members to serve geographic districts appointed by the governor. As originally conceived, the council would be a planning and coordinating agency charged with solving regional problems in the seven-county area, but over time, it has acquired additional responsibilities including control over transportation in the form of Metro Transit, which manages mass transit in the Twin Cities. Today, there are growing calls to reform the council by making it directly elected to counter its occasionally state-centric approach as well as providing it with greater land use authority. The council is recognized by the federal government as the Metropolitan Planning Organization for the region, giving it leverage over proposed projects through the power of the purse.³

¹Lass, William E. *Minnesota, A History*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1998.

²Leading Companies in Minnesota. MetroMSP. http://www.metromsp.org/sidebar/why_leadingcompanies.htm

³A bold experiment: the Metropolitan Council at 40. Metropolitan Council. <http://www.metrocouncil.org/about/metcouncilhistory.pdf>

Like many urban areas in the United States, the Twin Cities were designed for automobiles with low-density suburbs sprawling out from the core cities and connected by high-speed freeways. This historical pattern of urban development is at the heart of the transportation problems that plague MSP. When the Metropolitan Council was first created, the regional bus system was in complete disarray, with aging buses and poor quality route schedules. One of the first acts of the council was assisting the Metropolitan Transit Commission in buying out all the private bus operators and creating a new public transit system. The system has improved tremendously ever since, and today ridership exceeds 76 million a year.⁴ While buses remain the heart of the public transportation system, they are not the only option historically considered by the council. The council has also heard proposals to build a heavy rail system modeled on the Bay Area's CalTrain that would offer comprehensive rail service throughout the metropolitan area. This proposal was struck down in the mid-1970s, although the council at the time would lay the groundwork for several possible light rail corridors. These options would come to fruition in the late 1990s and early 2000s when funding for light rail gained prominence and popularity in Minnesota.⁵

Possible Solutions

Transporting millions of people across miles of terrain is not an easy task, and there are very few solutions available given the current status of development and urban density in the Twin Cities. The three main solutions include expanding sidewalks and bike lanes, adding and expanding freeways, and adding light rail.

⁴Regional Transit Overview. Metropolitan Council. <http://www.metrocouncil.org/about/facts/RegionalTransitFacts.pdf>

⁵A bold experiment: the Metropolitan Council at 40. Metropolitan Council. <http://www.metrocouncil.org/about/metcouncilhistory.pdf>

While bus service is a core method of transit regionally, expanding bus service has not been an ideal option since most of its potential has already been fulfilled.

Despite the cold winters, Minneapolis and St. Paul have some of the most pedestrian and bicycle friendly streets in the United States. The 2005 American Community Survey found that Minneapolis was second only to Portland for commuters who biked to work.⁶ Minneapolis has recently finished its bicycle master plan, including a commitment to connect all neighborhoods by bike trails within the decade.⁷ However, biking can also cause problems with other transit initiatives. One example of this problem is the Midtown Greenway, a 5.5 mile bike trail through the center of Minneapolis that was built in the late 1990s with the help of a regional player called the Midtown Greenway Coalition. The self-described grassroots group is now fighting back proposals to add express bus service to the greenway, countering with their own proposal to build an electric streetcar system.⁸ This issue exemplifies an important rule in transit politics: every advocacy organization focuses on its own interests, which is often at odds with major regional initiatives. While the Twin Cities as a whole has an extensive network of bike trails, it is highly unlikely that biking will be a solution to transit problems in the region.

The next option for improving transportation is adding and expanding highways. While there were few new highways built during the 1990s, the Minnesota Department of Transportation recently finished a five-year highway expansion plan to increase capacity on the primary arteries that run throughout the region. These projects were heavily funded by the state from 2004 to 2008, and led to the com-

⁶American Community Survey Bicycle Commuting Trends, 2000 to 2008. League of American Bicyclists. http://www.bikeleague.org/resources/reports/pdfs/acs_08_summary.pdf

⁷Bicycle Master Plan. City of Minneapolis. <http://www.ci.minneapolis.mn.us/bicycles/bicycle-plans.asp>

⁸Midtown Greenway Coalition.<http://www.midtowngreenway.org/index.html>

pletion of sixteen major transportation projects.⁹ As vividly displayed by the Minneapolis bridge collapse in 2007, this focus on new highways has delayed the maintenance of existing highway infrastructure, creating significant future challenges. While the Minnesota Department of Transportation argues that the highway infrastructure will not be degraded, other players in the region do not agree. Conrad de Fiebre, a transportation fellow at the progressive regional think tank Minnesota 2020, writes that Minnesota is now in the bottom quarter of states for highway maintenance and his response is simple: “In other words, brace yourself for a BUMPY RIDE.”¹⁰ There have been large strides in improving the highway system (and commute times have shortened), but the future maintenance of this infrastructure will determine to what extent highways remain a major solution and not a hindrance.

The most innovative — and controversial — solution for the Twin Cities’ transportation problems revolves around rail-based infrastructure. First sketched in the 1980s by the Metropolitan Council, commuter rails and light rail trains have played a central role by providing a hub-and-spoke mass transit system to all outlying suburbs into the city. However, this vision has been long-delayed, and even now remains far from completion. The first proposal for an LRT line was the Central Corridor, a land strip connecting together Minneapolis and St. Paul and the main case study of this paper. While it is one of the strongest proposals for light rail given its consistently high projected ridership numbers, it has faced intense opposition for many years. Karri Plowman, the Director of Central Corridor and East Metro Partnerships for the St. Paul Chamber of Commerce, described the opposition from the business community as fear of the unknown. Later when the

⁹2030 Transportation Policy Plan. Chapter 6: Highways. Metropolitan Council. <http://www.metrocouncil.org/planning/transportation/TPP/2008/Ch6Highways.pdf>

¹⁰De Fiebre, Conrad. Transportation in Minnesota: Staring Down a Bumpy Road. Minnesota 2020.

proposal was reintroduced, many business owners “realized that by killing the Central Corridor in St. Paul, they had killed it without understanding it fully” and as time moved on, “they realized that was the direction the nation was heading.”¹¹ Another rail line under consideration was the Hiawatha Line LRT, which would connect the Mall of America and the MSP International Airport with downtown Minneapolis. Minneapolis faced similar opposition to this line, but it was able to muster the political will to see the project to its conclusion, opening in 2004. Today, ridership far exceeds original expectations, and this success has helped propel other rail projects forward.¹²

The changing nature of transportation in the United States has come to Minneapolis and St. Paul, and there is now greater awareness of the need for multi-modal transportation options. Changing the transit culture may be slow, but when done properly, it can leave most satisfied with the results. Dave van Hattum works for Transit for Livable Communities, a non-profit organization that advocates for balanced transportation systems. He described the problem as one of framing: “supporting multiple transit choices is a smart investment” for the region.¹³ That was echoed by Plowman, who described rail as a draw for well-educated workers. Van Hattum wants to see these disparate rail projects turn into a true system that would allow residents to travel from one side of the region to another using just public transportation. At the same time, he does not take a hardline approach against personal vehicles. “We want to get politicians to support multi-modal—which does not mean we have to stop building roads.” That formula is perhaps the strongest to address the large regional transportation issues that plague the

¹¹Interview with Karri Plowman. 1 June 2010

¹²Yuen, Laura. Central Corridor: A slow train coming. Minnesota Public Radio. 27 April 2010. <http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2010/04/20/centcorridor1-delays/>

¹³Interview with Dave van Hattum. 1 June 2010

Twin Cities. It is about offering different options to different people, and moving an auto-centric culture to a sustainable one.

Central Corridor Project

Of course, the high-level issue of providing multi-modal transportation becomes a lot more challenging when actual projects are considered. To understand the issues of planning for multi-modal transit, this paper will look at the Central Corridor light rail project, including its history and major controversies.

The current push to build the Central Corridor LRT began in 2001, when Ramsey County —the county of St. Paul— began studies to determine the environmental impact of building a light rail system. Looking at the Hiawatha Line as a model, the county immediately set out to bring in stakeholders in on the project and held numerous public outreach meetings. At this time, the Central Corridor Management Committee was established to build consensus among political leaders. Laura Baenen, a representative of the Metropolitan Council, explained that the committee was crucial in building the support necessary for the CC LRT. “Both mayors had a lot of input” and this helped in ensuring that both Minneapolis and St. Paul supported the project.¹⁴ That consensus helped in applying to the Federal Transit Administration, which oversees the New Starts program that funds large transportation infrastructure projects. Unlike the last time the line was proposed, the business community was very supportive of the proposal. Karri Plowman described how business leaders traveled on inter-city leadership trips and saw strong rail systems in competing regional areas across the country. Business leaders “learned that to have a competitive city requires good mass transit,” he said.¹⁵ The chamber created the Central Corridor Partnership, which included

¹⁴Interview with Laura Baenen. 26 May 2010

¹⁵Interview with Karri Plowman. 1 June 2010

representatives from the business community and from non-profits to bring about grassroots support for the project, and the chamber also facilitated trips to DC to garner legislative support. The Twin Cities steadfastly pushed for the project as well, and as Baenen describes, “both the cities and the counties really, really want this project.” The project is now waiting final approval from the federal government.¹⁶

The line itself will be 11 miles long. Starting on the west side, the train will share five stations with the Hiawatha Line before diverging to cross the Mississippi River. Three major stations will serve the University of Minnesota, with a station on each bank of the campus. From there, it travels down University Ave. — a major area of commerce — with ten stations covering roughly seven miles of the line. Due to initial concerns about the distance between the stations, project planners eventually added three additional stops to increase coverage here. At this point, the train reaches the State Capitol, where it continues for four more stops to arrive at the Union Depot Station, which will one day be a major transit hub for St. Paul. Initial projections show that 40,000 passengers will ride the line each day, and the final cost of the project is estimated at just under \$1 billion dollars.¹⁷

Central Corridor Controversies

While there are numerous benefits to having light rail serve the heart of the Twin Cities, developing a train line in a dense urban area requires much finesse. The Central Corridor has not been without its share of controversies, and this section

¹⁶History of the Central Corridor project. Metropolitan Council. <http://www.metrocouncil.org/transportation/ccorridor/cchistory.htm>

¹⁷Central Corridor Light Rail Transit: Project Facts. Metropolitan Council. <http://www.metrocouncil.org/transportation/ccorridor/CCimages/Maps/CurrentCCLRTPProjectFacts.pdf>

will look at the controversies that have hit the Central Corridor and how they relate to regional transportation solutions.

One of the fundamental reasons why cities build transportation networks is to increase commerce. In order for businesses to sell goods, they must be accessible to potential buyers. This formula has relied on cars and roads, and it is sometimes difficult for businesses to see the benefits of other modes of transit. While the business community has been supportive of the line, there have still been concerns from individual business owners about its effect on their businesses. In particular, it is believed that light rail will heavily damage businesses on University Avenue by reducing car traffic since the number of street lanes will be reduced to construct the rail line. Furthermore, almost all of the street parking spots will be eliminated due to the currently planned alignment (from 1,150 to 175 spots).¹⁸ Of course, building light rail, especially one with as many expected passengers as the CC LRT, should help to mitigate these problems. However, new project proposals like this train lead to fears of the unknown as described by St. Paul Chamber of Commerce president Susan Kimberly to MPR.¹⁹ Karri Plowman said that “balancing competing interests is difficult” and that public affairs offices are crucial for “for translating the wonky to something the public understands.”²⁰ For the most part, the concerns of the business community have been significantly decreased due to the success of the Hiawatha Line, but this leads to questions on how to build trust in the business community on future transit projects. The most important connection that must be made is that public transit is a pro-business strategy:

¹⁸Central Corridor LRT: Frequently asked questions. Metropolitan Council. <http://www.metrocouncil.org/transportation/ccorridor/ccfaq.htm#parking>

¹⁹Yuen, Laura. Central Corridor: A slow train coming. Minnesota Public Radio. 27 April 2010. <http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2010/04/20/centcorridor1-delays/>

²⁰Interview with Karri Plowman. 1 June 2010

it brings more people into business areas, and helps to attract and retain a high quality workforce.

Economic issues play a critical role, but another controversy that has risen to the surface is social justice. The planned alignment of the Central Corridor LRT will travel straight through an historic neighborhood with long roots in the St. Paul African-American community, raising questions whether the development is just. The neighborhood in question is Rondo, and it has a long and distinguished history in St. Paul, becoming the center of a large African-American population through much of the early 1900s. Unfortunately, the neighborhood was shattered by the construction of a highway in the 1960s, and thousands of African-Americans were displaced into a hostile racial environment.²¹²² Today, there remains a small diverse population in the neighborhood which will again be displaced by the light rail construction. Unlike the Hiawatha Line, which passes through established streets in Minneapolis, and the Southwest Corridor, which follows freeways, the CC LRT must be built through a dense urban area. What are the ethics of building light rail through neighborhoods of different socioeconomic backgrounds? What is the balance between the property holders in the neighborhood and the need for regional development? These questions are complicated by the long-term effects of the train itself. With stations in the neighborhood, analysts believe that property values may rise — leading to gentrification and displacing the last remnants of this shattered community. These issues have been too much to bear for the St. Paul chapter of the NAACP, and they have initiated a lawsuit against the project to force it to address their concerns. Even so, the organization's president is aware that the train is a reality, and is hoping that concessions can be made to help

²¹Rondo Neighborhood & the Building of I-94. Minnesota Historical Society. http://www.mnhs.org/library/tips/history_topics/112rondo.html

²²Remembering Rondo: Construction of a Highway, Destruction of a Diverse Community. Woodland Hills Church. http://www.whchurch.org/content/page_285.htm

the residents mitigate the train's effects.²³ While this issue is perhaps unique to the CC LRT, the larger issues of justice are not. As transit planners begin other projects, it is critical that representatives of civil rights are part of the dialogue to ensure that projects mitigate their impact on low-income residents and ensure that projects are just.

In addition to economic effects and environmental justice, there are more mundane issues with building a light rail like the Central Corridor. Anti-tax groups have been angry at the decision to front money for the project at a time when the state is facing a multi-billion dollar deficit and much of the highway system is in need of repair. Minnesota's Republican Governor Tim Pawlenty has also signed a "No New Taxes" pledge that has made it difficult to construct the funding package needed for large transportation infrastructure projects. These political considerations can vastly complicate a multi-year construction project like LRT.²⁴ Grassroots organizations like the Citizens for Effective Transit in the Twin Cities have fought the proposal due to its cost.²⁵ In addition, there are parochial interests working against the Central Corridor line. The University of Minnesota has opposed the line because it is worried that sound vibrations from the train could significantly harm research. In particular, the university is worried about an imaging lab that is located mere feet from the line and requires incredible stability to be effective. The university believes that the Metropolitan Council has not added any major changes to the plan to handle its needs, and the university has now initiated

²³Yuen, Laura. Central Corridor: In the shadow of Rondo. Minnesota Public Radio. 20 April 2010. <http://minnesota.publicradio.org/display/web/2010/04/20/centcorridor3-rondo/>

²⁴Berg, Steve. Central Corridor light rail line faces critical moment. MinnPost. http://www.minnpost.com/steveberg/2008/01/18/626/central_corridor_light_rail_line_faces_critical_moment

²⁵Citizens for Effective Transit in the Twin Cities. <http://www.effectivetransit.org/>

a lawsuit to ensure that vibration mitigation is planned.²⁶ A similar lawsuit was filed by Minnesota Public Radio, since its recording studio is located adjacent to the proposed train.²⁷ All three of these issues show that it is almost impossible to satisfy every political constituency and group when building a project as large as the Central Corridor. Compromising can lead to better results, but these kind of projects need strong leadership from politicians willing to push hard to make them a reality. If the Twin Cities are going to continue building these projects, there must be a constant engagement with the public and with interest groups to build the coalition of support needed to ensure federal funding and ultimately reach a completed project.

Moving Forward: Different Cases

The transportation issues facing the Twin Cities are severe, but significant improvements have been made in recent years, especially in highway construction and light rail planning. This compares favorably with the San Francisco Bay Area experience, where transportation projects are confounded by extremely powerful interest groups that can swiftly derail major projects. Looking at one project—the BART Extension into San Francisco International Airport—can provide a comparative case study to understand the Twin Cities experience with transit planning.

Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) is a heavy-rail transit system that connects San Francisco with Oakland and much of the East Bay. The goal of BART was to connect the entire Bay Area together under one transportation system, but that

²⁶Central Corridor Light Rail Transit (CCLRT) Questions and Answers. University of Minnesota. http://lightrail.umn.edu/assets/pdf_new/Q-A_jan-29-10.pdf

²⁷MPR Noise Issue Delays Central Corridor. Associated Press. 17 January 2009. <http://wcco.com/local/mpr.noise.delays.2.911026.html>

goal was derailed due to politics surrounding the cost of the project and the demographics of the ridership. Despite these setbacks, BART began plans to expand south from San Francisco and connect to SFO — allowing visitors to the city to go from their planes to the city without leaving the public transportation network. Building this expansion project was not a simple task. The level of trust among Bay Area public transit users remains very low according to Russell Hancock, currently the president of Joint Ventures: Silicon Valley and formerly, Vice President of the Bay Area Council. The issue is that the Bay Area is served by three different transit operators: BART, CalTrain and the Valley Transportation Authority (VTA), all of which compete for the same federal funds. Thus, projects like the SFO expansion can easily become battlegrounds between these groups. The plan for the expansion itself was controversial, with many potential options including a multi-modal station or a transfer point. Furthermore, there were environmental and ecological concerns due to the natural habitat near the proposed construction. Initiating the project required an immense amount of cooperation from political and business leaders. Hancock describes how the Bay Area Council, a business group, worked on building an agreement between the three transit operators to apply for federal funding jointly —preventing their individual plans from being cannibalized. From there, the council organized regular trips to Washington, D.C. for Silicon Valley CEOs to generate support for the project. After forty years of planning and several years of organizing in the mid-1990s, the SFO expansion was built and opened in 2003.²⁸²⁹

Like the Central Corridor line, the BART expansion relied upon the involvement of the business community to get the project completed. The Bay Area

²⁸Interview with Russell Hancock. 26 May 2010

²⁹Wilson, Marshall. TUNNELING TO SFO: BART airport project goes from dream to reality. San Francisco Chronicle. 15 June 1999. <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/1999/06/15/MN47BAR.DTL>

Council, like the St. Paul Chamber of Commerce, identified the large value of a rail project and worked its contacts to ensure that the project was successful, including sending business leaders to Washington, D.C. The interest groups aligned against both transportation projects are also somewhat similar: groups with somewhat parochial interests attempting to delay a project with wide benefits. However, it is at the governmental level that the two projects clearly diverge. The Bay Area has very little cooperation among its dozens of cities and nine counties. There is no regional government, and transportation issues are split among many organizations like the Bay Area Metropolitan Transportation Commission, the three transit operators, and the California Department of Transportation. The Twin Cities in contrast has a single entity, the Metropolitan Council, with the power to decide on these projects. Politics also plays a lesser role in the Central Corridor case. Both mayors of the cities and the county commissioners came together early to work out their differences, creating a unified front and showing the federal government in their application that there was political support for the project. The Bay Area does not have this level of cooperation, and organizations like the Bay Area Council and Joint Ventures: Silicon Valley must step in and bring the major players together. The comparison of these two projects clearly indicate two points: first, powerful interest groups like the business community must be allies for a transit project to be successful and second, significant political will must exist for a large rail project to come to fruition. Without either ingredient, no mass transit project will reach construction.

Conclusion

According to Laura Baenen at the Metropolitan Council, work has already begun on moving several underground utilities needed for the Central Corridor project,

even though a final agreement has not yet been reached with the federal government. There remains several on-going lawsuits, none of which are believed strong enough to halt the project, but any one of which could delay it if the federal government believes that there are outstanding issues that need to be addressed. The Central Corridor LRT is predicted to take four years to build, with the first riders boarding sometime during 2014. The Metropolitan Council is not stopping with just this project though, and has already begun the initial analysis of a new train line that would travel down the Southwest Corridor to connect the southwest suburbs with the Twin Cities. Long term, there are plans to create a high speed rail line between Chicago and St. Paul, as well as several other commuter lines.

As the two cities continue to grow, new transportation solutions will be needed to address increased demand. However, transit itself can only do so much to move people. The creation of fifth-ring suburbs raises serious questions about land use planning and population density. Options like mass transit, and to a degree highways, require a level of population density commensurate with their costs. Unless the Metropolitan Council is given more power over regional urban planning — a power it currently lacks — all of these new transportation projects will never solve the transit issues that plague the cities. Proposals to reform the council have generally fallen on deaf ears, but the approach is not without support. As Minneapolis and St. Paul adapt to the realities of the twenty-first century, the cities will need to think more regionally if they wish to create the ideal transit community that they envision.