



Citizen Advocates for Regional Transit

***Universal Transit Mobility through Unified Transit
Governance***

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Comments Prepared for the Task Force on Metropolitan Governance

Transit: Essential Structural Changes Needed

The work of the Task Force is tremendously important for the region and the state. But it's no secret that the greatest public frustration with the Met Council is due to the Southwest LRT project delays and huge increases in cost. It would be unfortunate if the governance issue was resolved but the transit issues that brought it to light continued to fester.

CART has studied this issue over many years and has identified several key structural issues with public transit legislation for the metropolitan area. Following are the top six structural issues that require immediate attention from the House and Senate Transportation Committees when the legislature next reconvenes:

The first structural issue for transit is, of course, appointment. As long as Council members serve at the pleasure of the Governor, one person ultimately controls everything Metro; and if the governor chooses, for example, not to lead on transit, not much happens. Serving merely at the pleasure of the governor, Council members have often seemed distant and unresponsive to public concerns.

An elected Met Council will eliminate this gubernatorial muffling and transfer leadership to the people directly affected; with this arrangement, the Council is far more likely to consistently care about and deliver a public transit system that works for the voters.

The second structural issue is the bifurcation of rail transit development between the counties which select the route and the Met Council that builds and operates the line.

Such a bifurcation in this massive undertaking is incredibly dangerous for effectiveness and accountability. Albeit in good faith, the line drawn by a county can easily overlook critical factors and issues for constructing and operating the line. These problems, nevertheless, will be found and need to be resolved, possibly taking a lot of time and money and result in lengthy

project delays and skyrocketing costs. That is what happened with both SWLRT and Bottineau (and may be seen again with the Riverview and Purple Lines).

This bifurcation must be eliminated. It is essential that the Legislature establish a single designer/builder/operator of the transit projects.

We believe the only entity with the necessary regional perspective, including urban growth and land use planning, regional service building and experience operating a major regional transit system is the Metropolitan Council. It's certainly not MnDot.

A related problem with the bifurcation is that each time a county sets out to draw the line for a transitway, a new set of consultants is hired and then let go a few years later; most of the knowledge acquired over several years of study walks out at the same time. There is little buildup of in-house expertise; much of the learning must be repeated each time. With one agency, the Met Council, responsible for developing all the transitways, it is much more likely that this knowledge and expertise would be retained and prevent repeated mistakes.

The third structural problem is the lack of specific clarity and mandate for what metro public transit should be in the 21st Century.

Current legislative direction is broad, impressive and ignored:

“...to provide, to the greatest feasible extent, a basic level of mobility for all people in the metropolitan area” and to “arrange to the greatest feasible extent for the provision of a comprehensive set of transit and paratransit services to meet the needs of all people in the metropolitan area”. (Sec. .473.371 MN Statutes) (emphasis added).

Instead of a transit system to meet the needs of all people in the metropolitan area, the Met Council is still building a 1920's hub and spoke system around the two downtowns. In recent years, it has invested billions of dollars on transitways that mostly feed downtown Minneapolis. But 90% of the public seldom go downtown; and the Covid epidemic has shown that much of the office work traditionally located downtown can be done at home. Among the 90% not going downtown are a great many people who can't, shouldn't, or prefer not to drive; the transit needs of a vast majority of people are not being met.

Over the last eighty years, dozens of metropolitan centers have begun to evolve throughout the region; these need to be part of the regional transit system. A 21st Century metropolitan transit System should connect these centers and the legacy downtowns through a System of BRT and LRT routes. Any local area that is taxed for transit improvements should have transit modes appropriate for that area that bring regular transit service to those communities and connects them to a backbone network of LRT and BRT, which in turn makes the rest of the metropolitan areas accessible. The long-term objective of the System should be to enable anyone in such transit taxing district to reach any other part of the transit taxing district in a reasonable amount

of time. The Legislature should immediately establish this as both goal and mandate for transit investment going forward.

The fourth structural problem is the lack of local government participation in and responsibility for “the last mile” - the route from your door to the transit station or bus stop and the route from the bus stop or transit station to your destination. Plans to improve access to transit should be a key part of the comprehensive plan.

The public and its agencies must understand that a transit ride is from door-to-door, not station-to-station or bus stop-to-bus stop. Not all homes or destinations are going to be directly adjacent to a station or bus stop. The trek to or from a station or bus stop, can make or break the transit ride. This is especially so for people with disabilities, but realistically every transit rider is reluctant or unable to ride transit if the paths to and from transit are blocked by snow, ice, broken or missing pavement, pools of water, trash, obstacles, dangerous traffic, or crossings with no pedestrian protections, to name a few.

Local governments control most roads and walkways; they possess planning, zoning and other regulatory powers and can build and maintain walkways needed by transit riders. The last mile must receive attention comparable to the transitways themselves.

The Legislature should require the participation of each local government in analyzing the need for and characteristics of public transit within their jurisdiction, for both local and regional connections and both in-coming and out-going riders. This should be part of their comprehensive planning process, including the development of each municipality’s own database and analyses of their needs for public transit. Wherever the Metropolitan Council provides or intends to provide public transit, the stops should be identified for each municipality and the municipality should identify any obstacles to access by the public, measures needed to correct and enhance access and to maintain accessibility to these stops.

The fifth structural problem is right-of-way acquisition.

According to the report of the Legislative Auditor, 80% of the delays and escalating costs of SWLRT were due to failure to work out a suitable arrangement with the freight railroads. For Bottineau, this has essentially stopped the line and caused the Met Council to find a new route for a large portion of the Line. Ramsey County had the opportunity to acquire an unused rail corridor for the Riverview project but did nothing when the merger of the railroad gave it a unique opportunity to acquire the land at a very attractive cost.

At the present time, there are several railroad corridors that are no longer needed for railroad use, but which can be tremendously valuable for the metropolitan area as public trail and transit corridors. The Met Council must be tasked with identifying and acquiring these properties that have extraordinary public value for transit and trails.

It is apparent that the assignment of the railroad relationship to individual county rail authorities creates a divide and conquer advantage for the railroads and fails to deliver the metropolitan perspective when opportunities occur to negotiate and make decisions on future public use of these rail corridors and other railroad properties.

The duties of the county railroad authorities need to be transferred to the Met Council where it can be addressed more thoroughly in the context of the several metropolitan systems and the land use and development plans of the local governments. Counties and municipalities must have input to this activity.

The sixth structural problem is adequate funding and progress reports.

Legislature needs to set goals for the Council to accomplish within designated periods and must receive annual updates from the Council. The Legislature must also include multiple sources of funding for continued building out of a 21st Century regional transit system, with or without federal money.

James Schoettler
Citizen Advocates for Regional Transit (CART)
[REDACTED]
St Paul MN 55116