

May 19, 2016

The Honorable Kurt Daudt, Speaker of the House  
Minnesota State Legislature  
463 State Office Building  
100 Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd.  
Saint Paul, MN 55155

Dear Speaker Daudt,

The City of Minneapolis encourages the House of Representatives to pass a comprehensive, long-term roads- and transit- funding package — and to do so this year. We specifically support the Senate proposal to enact a ¼-cent sales tax in the metro area to build a comprehensive transit system that includes major trunk line corridors like the Green Line (Southwest) LRT Extension and the Orange Line Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) project on 35W from downtown Minneapolis to Burnsville. A comprehensive transit package should also include operating dollars for the Metropolitan Council to improve and extend our regular route bus system. This connecting bus service to major trunk lines is necessary to have those larger projects meet their full potential.

The City of Minneapolis, and the region as a whole, is growing. This is great news. But whether or not we are getting ready for that growth is up to the Legislature. We have two options to accommodate growth.

1. A roads-only approach will not work, in part because it is financially impossible for the State to come up with enough revenue to build enough new freeway lanes to accommodate projected growth. MNDOT has been telling us this for years. We cannot build our way out of congestion. More congestion, more delays and more pollution is not the answer. It will choke our air — and our economy.
2. We can instead choose a balanced approach of roads and transit. We can use new technologies and new policies to squeeze the maximum capacity out of our existing lane miles. We can provide choices for commuters with both rail and bus transit expansions. We can use congestion pricing. We can accommodate a greater proportion of new growth near transit corridors. This is the only realistic future.

The principles of this more realistic vision drove the City of Minneapolis to lead in the development of a new vision of 35W, together with MnDOT, Met Council and our suburban counterparts. After decades of controversy, we now have a bipartisan, urban/suburban consensus around the Orange Line BRT project at the center of a redesigned freeway.

As this example demonstrates, the City of Minneapolis does not reflexively promote rail transit anywhere and everywhere. Quite the opposite: on each corridor, we should build the mode that is appropriate for that corridor, and buses will continue to provide service on the overwhelming percentage of corridors in the region.

But to deny the overwhelming success of Blue Line (Hiawatha) LRT and Green Line (Central) LRT is misguided in the face of the facts. Those who claimed these would be “trains to nowhere” have been proven wrong. Both of these projects exceeded their 2020 ridership projections years in advance. We’ve seen a huge surge of private-sector investment along the Green Line in just a few years, which is not a

coincidence: when the public makes a permanent investment in rail in the right corridor, the private sector responds with private investment. Rail is far superior as a catalyst for jobs and economic growth. Could the Green Line could have achieved this level of success as a bus project? Absolutely not. Rail transit also provides level boarding, which is “roll on, roll off” service for people with mobility challenges. This is a more accessible option on key corridors in a rapidly-aging society.

It is still possible for a transportation bill to be approved this year. But it is necessary to let go myths that are holding us back. It’s a myth that transit alone is subsidized but roads pay for themselves through the gas tax. In reality, driving is subsidized just as much, if not more, than transit. Your proposal to rely ever more on the general fund moves even further away from any notion that roads are self-supporting.

It’s also a myth that rural areas are being asked to pay for transit in the metro area. Under the Senate’s proposal, the metro area would pay for its own transit. Rural Minnesota would not have to pay for any transit in the metro area, including Southwest LRT. In the interest of getting a transportation bill passed, I would request that you publicly acknowledge this fact.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Betsy Hodges". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Betsy Hodges  
Mayor of Minneapolis