

Metropolitan Council: A Record of Accomplishment

Highlights from 2014

In 2014, the Metropolitan Council made significant progress in a number of areas that support the region's economic vitality and environmental sustainability: adopting the *Thrive MSP 2040* regional vision and the first *Housing Policy Plan* in 30 years; moving several key transitway projects forward, including opening the region's second light rail transit service, the METRO Green Line; reducing purchased fossil fuel energy use in the wastewater collection and treatment system by 21% since 2006; conducting groundbreaking research on use of regional parks by communities of color; completing a key study on groundwater sustainability in the northeast metro; investing regional funds in affordable housing, connected development, and contaminated land cleanup for economic development; and more.

1. Adopting Thrive MSP 2040

State law requires the Council to adopt a long-range plan for the seven-county Twin Cities region every 10 years. *Thrive MSP 2040* is the vision for the seven-county region. It reflects regional concerns and aspirations, anticipates future regional needs, and addresses our responsibility to future generations. It sets the policy foundation for the systems and policy plans that are developed by the Council: the Transportation Policy Plan, Water Resources Policy Plan, and Regional Parks Policy Plan; and the Housing Policy Plan.

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2. Livable Communities Act grants

In the 2014 funding cycle, the Council will award up to \$21.6 million in Livable Communities grants. The grants support revitalization of brownfields for job creation; transit-oriented development; and affordable housing.

Since 1995, the Council has awarded 876 grants totaling \$307 million to build or rehabilitate nearly 20,000 affordable housing units; clean up 2,100 acres of polluted land, creating or retaining 41,000 jobs; and support development of transit-oriented, connected land uses. The grants have leveraged billions of dollars in other public and private investments.

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3. Partnership for Regional Opportunity continues successful partnership in 2014

Launched in January 2011, the Corridors of Opportunity initiative brought together top leadership from state, regional and local government, philanthropy, nonprofit organizations, and business interests, focused on accelerating the build-out of the region's transit system while promoting adjacent development that advances economic vitality and benefits people of all incomes and backgrounds. Successes from the three-year initiative include:

- Transit corridor planning efforts—such as the Southwest Corridor Investment Framework—ensure station areas that result in economic growth and access to opportunity.
- Funding of a variety of catalytic transit-oriented development projects and plans to demonstrate the potential for TOD and accelerate market readiness.
- Support of diverse and locally owned small businesses during the stresses of light rail construction.
- Increased engagement of historically underrepresented community residents in planning, and created development plans that will better serve the communities in which they will be located.

Corridors of Opportunity completed its work in early 2014. But the project's leadership continued its efforts throughout the year as Partnership for Regional Opportunity, and broadened its vision to address region-wide prosperity and equity.

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4. New Public Engagement Plan

The Council partnered with community organizations to draft a new public engagement plan for all Council activities. Responding to a new approach to engagement called for in *Thrive MSP 2040*, the Community Engagement Steering Committee—a consortium of community organizations initially created to support Corridors of Opportunity—provided principles and best practices to guide this new approach. The new public engagement plan calls for a more collaborative engagement process, including shared decision making between the Council and affected constituencies. The new engagement plan will be adopted and fully implemented in 2015.

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5. Adoption of the new Housing Policy Plan

The Council adopted a new regional Housing Policy Plan, its first in nearly 30 years. The plan establishes the Council's broad housing policy direction for the coming decades. It will assist local communities throughout the region to plan for and create housing options that give all people, no matter their life stages or economic means, viable choices for safe, stable, and affordable homes.

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6. Highest-possible ranking for Metro HRA

In 2014, the Council's Housing and Redevelopment Authority (Metro HRA) earned the highest ranking possible for program operation from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for the 10th straight year. This 2014 ranking is for the calendar year 2013.

HUD and Congress use 14 indicators to measure and grade the performance of housing agencies that administer the Section 8 Housing Choice Voucher program. Working with landlords and program participants, Metro HRA ensured effective and efficient service. The result is that the Council is able to maximize the number of households served with rent assistance.

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7. Supporting homeless veterans

The Metro HRA has eighty (80) special purpose housing vouchers to provide rental assistance for homeless, low-income disabled veterans and their families. The program provides stable and safe housing which combines HRA rental assistance with Veteran's Affairs (VA) case management and clinical services to ensure success in independent living.

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8. Regional parks continue to be a top metro attraction

Twin Cities metro area residents love their parks. The number of annual visits to regional parks grew 3.3% from 2012 to 2013 (the latest figure available), reaching 47.3 million. For context, the Mall of America receives about 40 million annual visits.

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9. Two parks and 15 miles of regional trails opened

Whitetail Woods Regional Park northeast of Farmington in central Dakota County and Kingswood Special Recreation Feature managed by Three Rivers Park District in the City of Minnetrista were opened for public use in 2014. An additional 15 miles of regional trails were opened to extend 12 trails with segments ranging from 0.2 to 3.2 miles in the Counties of Anoka, Carver and Ramsey, plus suburban Hennepin County.

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10. Regional park and trail rehabilitation projects create jobs

The Council's investment in parks helps protect sensitive areas of the region's environment, expand and restore regional parks, and create jobs.

In 2014, the Council approved grants financed with State funds and Metro Council bonds:

- \$2.3 million to acquire 187 acres for regional trail right of way and park land.
- \$21.87 million for 46 regional park and trail rehabilitation/construction, natural resource restoration projects, plus six grants for staff support to provide architectural services, coordinate volunteers, and provide environmental education programs.

The Council was also the fiscal agent for nearly \$23 million of State bond appropriations that funded seven park and trail capital projects. The cumulative effect of these capital and non-capital grants is that they support 239 construction and parks staffing jobs.

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11. Review of regional park and trail master plans

The Council reviewed and approved master plan amendments for:

- Bruce Vento Regional Trail
- Anoka County Riverfront Regional Park
- Crow-Hassan Park Reserve
- Above the Falls Regional Park

The Council also reviewed and approved two master plans for Ridgway Parkway Regional Trail in Minneapolis, and Chain of Lakes-Otter Lake Regional Trail in Anoka and Ramsey counties.

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12. Region's second light rail transit line launched

To link downtown Saint Paul and Minneapolis, the University of Minnesota, the Midway area and State Capitol area by light rail, the Council finished construction and, on June 14, opened the METRO Green Line—on time and on budget. The opening brought all-day, frequent rail service to one of the busiest transit corridors in the Twin Cities.

Average weekday ridership is around 37,000, exceeding the 2015 ridership goal in the first few months, with some days reaching 41,000 rides, which exceeds the 2030 ridership goal. Including routes 16 and 94, ridership in the Central Corridor has nearly doubled from the previous year. Several connecting bus routes were also improved to allow for easier transfers to and from Green Line stations.

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13. Transit ridership keeps growing

Despite low gas prices, total annual Metro Transit ridership will grow to more than 84.5 million in 2014, a 33-year high. Average weekday ridership on all modes was 8.4% higher than 2013. Ridership has grown for nine of the last ten years and each of the last six. Ridership is at its highest level since 1981, when there were 90.5 million rides. Ridership is up 21% since 2005.

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14. Website redesign improves trip planning, mobile experience

Metro Transit introduced a redesigned website that provides customers enhanced trip planning features, including an improved interactive map. The redesigned website is also more accessible on mobile devices and aligns with Governor Dayton's Plain Language Initiative. In August, there were a record 1.1 million visits to the website. The online Trip Planner also set a record with 724,000 trip plans in August.

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15. New Park & Ride continues commitment to sustainability

A new Park & Ride in Brooklyn Park came as the latest sign of Metro Transit's continuing commitment to sustainability. The 1,000-space Park & Ride at Highway 610 and Noble Parkway features a geothermal heating & cooling system, electric vehicle charging stations, and a solar array that offsets energy use at the site. Metro Transit also became one of 12 transit agencies to earn Gold Level certification through the American Public Transportation Association's Sustainability Commitment program.

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16. Visitors from around the country experience transit network

The Major League Baseball All-Star Game drew thousands of visitors to the Twin Cities, many of whom used Metro Transit to get around. Nearly 45,000 additional light-rail and Northstar rides were generated by events during All-Star Week. Around 6,000 people took light rail to the All-Star Game.

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17. Metro Transit Police Department grows, becomes more diverse

The Metro Transit Police Department grew to more than 200 part- and full-time officers, allowing for more community-based policing along the Green Line and in downtown and North Minneapolis. The department also built on its commitment to diversity adding officers of Somali, Hmong and Latino descent.

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18. Advancing METRO Green Line Extension project

In an important step towards extending the METRO Green Line from Minneapolis to St. Louis Park, Hopkins, Minnetonka, and Eden Prairie, the Council received municipal consent from all five cities and Hennepin County. The Council also secured 85 percent (\$705 million) of the local funding commitment, which is more than the 70 percent local funding commitment that the Federal Transit Administration

looks for before approving the project's entry into Engineering. That approval is expected in 2015. In 2014, engineers completed 30 percent design plans, and the Council issued an RFP for the Advanced Design Consultant and prepared for award of the contract.

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19. Assuming responsibility for METRO Blue Line Extension project

In the first step toward extending the METRO Blue Line from Minneapolis to Golden Valley, Robbinsdale, Crystal, and Brooklyn Park, the Federal Transit Administration approved the project to enter the federal New Starts program. The Council selected a project office site in Crystal, selected Engineering Services and Final Environmental Impact Statement consultants and issued Notices to Proceed.

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20. Snelling Ave. BRT A Line construction under way

The Council approved plans for the region's first arterial Bus Rapid Transit Line. Named the A Line, it will run on Snelling Avenue and Ford Parkway between the Rosedale Transit Center in Roseville and the METRO Blue Line's 46th Street Station in Minneapolis. The line will include 20 enhanced stations, faster and more frequent bus service, and specialized train-like features that make boarding more efficient. Funding for the \$25 million project comes from the state, the Council, and federal grants. Construction is under way and service will begin in late 2015.

21. Metro Mobility technology projects

Metro Mobility completed a multi-year Mobile Data Computer (MDC) installation project on its fleet in 2014. MDCs provide real-time, up-to-date schedule information for drivers, dispatchers, and customers. This project improved on-time performance and increased the number of riders served per hour while managing an 8.5% ridership increase from 2013 to 2014.

In addition to improving on-time performance, this technology has helped reduce Metro Mobility's use of the Emergency Response Radio System for the metropolitan area by 70%. The reduction in "talk time" has freed up capacity on the system and helps ensure that emergency calls will not be disrupted or delayed.

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22. Regional Solicitation upgrade

The Transportation Advisory Board (TAB) and the Council evaluated and made changes to the Regional Solicitation process for projects seeking federal transportation funding, which had been in place since 1992. One of the biggest changes is that funding is now available from three modal categories: roadways, transit, and bicycle and pedestrian. Previously it wasn't as clear which category applicants should apply to.

The revamped process also builds in greater flexibility. For example, project evaluators have a range of dollars to award to each mode. That gives TAB the ability to award funds to the strongest, most viable projects that offer the most benefit to the region. Other changes are designed to streamline and shorten the process, and make the scoring more transparent. The Council also took applications online for the first time.

Approximately \$150 million was available for the 2014 Regional Solicitation. Awards will be made in July 2015.

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23. 2014 Rail~Volution held in the Twin Cities

Hundreds of planners, elected officials, and activists visited the Twin Cities region from Sept. 21 to 24, to participate in the 20th annual Rail~Volution conference. Rail~Volution is a nonprofit whose mission is to build livable communities with transit by inspiring people to make better transit and land use decisions. The annual conference draws participants from across the country and all levels of expertise together each year to discuss current trends and issues in transit and transit-related disciplines, and provide an opportunity to learn from each other's experiences. The Metropolitan Council is a proud co-sponsor of this event, along with the Counties Transit Improvement Board, and the Minnesota Department of Transportation.

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24. Saving energy and money

The Council's Environmental Services (MCES) division saved \$4.7 million in 2014 fossil-fuel energy purchases for wastewater treatment, compared to 2006. The savings result in lower wastewater rates for city and industrial customers, as well as significant environmental benefits. MCES is continuing its energy conservation and renewable energy projects that generate energy to be used onsite. MCES is on track to meet its 25% purchased energy reduction goal by 2015, having reduced purchased energy 21% (220,000 MMBTU) by end of 2014. This 21% reduction equates to 65 million kilowatt hours.

Over the past nine years MCES has been recognized by Xcel Energy several times as leaders in industrial energy efficiency in the state. Mostly recently, in April 2014, Xcel won the Xcel Energy Efficiency Award for 2013, when it achieved over 11 million kWhs in conservation.

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25. Keeping sewer rates competitive

MCES provides wastewater treatment services to 108 municipalities in the seven-county area at wholesale rates. In turn, those municipalities bill the households and businesses within their boundaries for the wastewater treatment services received, at an average annual rate of \$255. This \$255 retail sewer rate compares favorably to an average rate of \$393 reported by 24 similarly sized wastewater treatment "peer" agencies in the U.S., according to the most recent survey (2011) by the National Association of Clean Water Agencies (NACWA).

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26. Council protects public health and environment

MCES treats approximately 250 million gallons of wastewater from more than two million residents daily. This cleaned water is discharged to our rivers. Six MCES wastewater treatment plants earned national awards for five years or more of perfect discharge permit compliance through 2014: Hastings (23 years); St. Croix Valley (22 years); Seneca (13 years); Blue Lake (8 years); Eagles Point (8 years); and Empire (6 years). These compliance records are among the highest in the nation.

Additionally, a new MCES facility, the East Bethel Water Reclamation Facility, began service in 2014. Its treated wastewater is used to recharge the groundwater and also is planned to be used for irrigation.

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27. Seeking solution to water supply issues

Through partnerships with local communities and government agencies, the Council's water supply studies and projects seek to ensure that regional water supplies can support current and future generations. In 2014, the Council completed a study of alternatives for ensuring the sustainability of water resources in the northeast metro area.

These projects will support community efforts to protect and manage water supplies and prevent further degradation of water sources in the metropolitan area. The Council's water supply efforts will help identify high-priority areas for protecting groundwater, will identify feasible options to address emerging water supply issues, and will support communities' efforts to preserve groundwater recharge areas.

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