

Transportation Policy – Transit Issues

Scope, geography and authority of the discussion

Public transit is a core component of the regional transportation system defined in the Metropolitan Land Planning Act. *Thrive* and the Transportation Policy Plan define the policy priorities and strategies. Metro Transit operates 90 percent of the regional transit system, including:

- Regular-route bus service, including local service, limited stop, and express service. This is the backbone of the system.
- Transitways -- fixed-route transit with high capital investment:
 - Light rail transit (METRO Blue Line and the METRO Green Line)
 - Commuter Rail (Northstar)
 - Bus rapid transit (METRO Red Line)
- Public vanpools
- Dial-a-ride

Regular route service operates within the Transit Capital Levy communities, those local jurisdictions that levy a property tax to pay for capital improvements to the transit system. Additionally, the region is beginning planning for a system of arterial Bus Rapid Transit routes.

Transit investments are also controlled by federal policies tied to funding, including criteria in the New Starts program that provides half of the capital funding for major transitway construction, such as the METRO Green Line.

The region is completing a network of park-and-rides with commuter express service. These facilities are not a focal point for this discussion because while they do serve existing development patterns and relieve congestion, they rarely transform land use and development patterns.

Today's issues are connected to past and future *Thrive* discussions on:

- Highway investment;
- Climate change;
- Geographic Planning Areas;
- Economic competitiveness; and
- Affordable housing.

Existing policy direction

Policy 2 of the [Regional Development Framework](#) states, "Plan and invest in multimodal transportation choices, based on the full range of costs and benefits, to slow the growth of congestion and serve the region's economic needs." The [Transportation Policy Plan](#), last adopted in 2010, outlines transit policies in greater detail and defines Transit Market Areas (Fig. 7-19).

According to the [Regional Service Improvement Plan](#), productivity—getting the most rides per dollar of investment—is the most important factor in choosing transit investment, including regular route bus service. The first priority for the region's limited transit funding is preservation, operation and maintenance of the existing system. Expanding the bus system and building a network of rail and bus-rapid-transit transitways are secondary priorities pursued when additional funding is available.

Emerging tensions

Since the 2004 adoption of the [Framework](#), three major transitways have opened – METRO Blue Line LRT (Hiawatha), Northstar Commuter Rail and the METRO Red Line BRT. The METRO Green Line is scheduled to begin service in 2014. The METRO Blue Line quickly surpassed ridership expectations, but the pace of development along Hiawatha Avenue taught the region that transit investment alone does not lead to transit-oriented development (TOD). This recognition led to the Corridors of Opportunity partnership and new TOD-focused staff in Minneapolis, Saint Paul, and the Metropolitan Council.

Both nationally and locally, transit is emerging as a viable and desirable transportation alternative – [particularly for younger generations interested in remaining connected during commutes and in reducing their carbon footprints](#). The Itasca Project's [Return on Investment Study](#) found that the build-out of the region's transit system would bring direct economic benefits of \$6 billion to \$11 billion. The spring 2013 legislative discussion of a new dedicated funding stream created increased interest in transit across the region, including in areas that are currently not well-served by transit.

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A key tension is how to prioritize future investments in all-day fixed-route service, especially regular-route bus service and transitways, and specifically, how to align land use patterns and prospective transit service. The following community typology helps articulate this match:

- **Transit-intensive**, characterized by high existing levels of transit service, high job and residential density, well-connected development patterns, high walkability, and high transit-reliant populations. Service improvements here tend to lead to the most ridership growth.
- **Transit-opportunity**, characterized by moderate levels of existing transit service, moderate job and residential densities, somewhat-connected development patterns, and growing transit-reliant populations. Service improvements could lead to higher ridership, especially with increasing densities and evolving development patterns.
- **Transit-hopeful**, characterized by little local transit service, low job and residential densities, and disconnected auto-oriented development patterns. Service improvements would generate little ridership without transformative changes to local urban form and development patterns.

Questions for discussion

A. Transit investment factors

Transportation priorities such as maximizing ridership, cost-effectiveness, and congestion relief always factor into transit investments. Which additional factors should influence priorities for regional transit investment (in both local bus service and transitways)? How should the Council balance these competing goals?

- Improving service to existing regional employment centers
- Serving potential new or emerging regional employment centers
- Connecting lower-income residents and residents of racially-concentrated areas of poverty to opportunity (i.e., jobs, education)
- Attracting new development
- Expanding geographic coverage
- Environmental stewardship

B. Transit investment strategies

The Council can prioritize the “where” and “when” of its transit investments; results vary by the transit-readiness of local land use patterns. What is the right mix of strategies?

- Invest in **transit-intensive** communities to maximize ridership growth and focus transit-oriented development. (Examples: METRO Green Line, circulators, high-frequency routes, streetcars)
- Invest in **transit-opportunity** communities to moderately grow ridership and provide transit service (and opportunities for TOD) in more areas. (Examples: suburban LRT extensions, arterial BRT)
- Invest in connections to and help **transit-hopeful** communities to plan and build transit-supportive development patterns in corridors and nodes, thereby creating transit-opportunity areas. (Examples: extensions of arterial or highway BRT, LRT connections)
- Invest in connections within **transit-hopeful** and **transit-opportunity** communities to expand the service coverage and TOD opportunities but at reduced cost-effectiveness. (Examples: suburb-to-suburb lines, express bus to suburban job locations, some BRT)

C. Transit and land use alignment tools

When communities agree to pursue new transit service and through to construction and operation, what mix of incentives, assistance and regulatory approaches should the Council use to promote local land use decisions that leverage transit investments?

- Incorporate transit investment priorities into regional grant program criteria.
- Provide more education and technical assistance to local communities, including assistance with TOD.
- Review Comprehensive Plans for conformance with transit-supportive land use standards (such as density, connectedness or urban form) along major transit corridors.