

Committee Report

Transportation Committee



Committee meeting date: August 11, 2025

For the Metropolitan Council: August 27, 2025

Business Item: 2025-178

Northstar Commuter Rail Suspension and Replacement Service Plan

Proposed action

That the Metropolitan Council authorize the suspension of Northstar Commuter Rail service pursuant to all applicable contracts, agreements, easements, and licenses, and approves enhanced bus service serving the Northstar Corridor within the seven-county Metropolitan area to be incorporated in Network Now.

Summary of Transportation Committee discussion/questions

Metro Transit Service Development Director Adam Harrington presented this item.

Chamblis asked about the plan for Big Lake and Elk River replacement bus service. Harrington stated that MNDOT has the authority to provide bus service in Sherburne County and Metro Transit staff are working with MnDOT on what kind of service replacement options there might be for those two areas; Sherburne County is also interested. Chamblis asked about the Northstar Link. Harrington stated it is a bus service that was introduced after 2010 and connects from the Big Lake station to St. Cloud carrying approximately 25 riders each direction. Harrington continued that this service is ran by St. Cloud Metro Bus and it's not believed that they will pursue continuing that service.

Obisakin asked how much insurance cost would increase. Harrington stated it would increase about \$400,000 a year or more starting in 2026. Obisakin asked for approximate operating cost for bus service compared to the \$18.6 million per year for Northstar Commuter Rail service. Harrington stated that the enhanced bus would cost approximately \$3.5 million per year.

Johnson stated that the pre-pandemic ridership numbers (2,660 average weekday rides) weren't even close to the original projections (5,590 average weekday rides). Johnson supports the enhanced bus service plan, and encourages dialogue with Sherburne County and MNDOT to develop a bus service.

Johnson and Chair Barber expressed understanding with the difficulty with this decision, and the impacts on people who use Northstar.

Several Council members noted that it was a difficult but correct decision to move this item forward.

Motion by Johnson, was seconded by Carter, Tyronne. Motion carried.

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District(s), member(s):	District 2, Councilmember Reva Chamblis District 7, Councilmember Yassin Osman District 9, Councilmember Diego Morales
Policy/legal reference:	Procedure 2-2; 2-2e Public Involvement in Transportation Service Changes and Restructuring; Minnesota Statute 473.121, subd. 2; 174.90
Staff prepared/presented:	Lesley Kandas, Metro Transit General Manager Adam Harrington, Director, Service Development Craig Lamothe, Director, Northstar Transition Jonathan Ahn, Assistant Director, Service Development Ryan Heath, Manager, Service Development
Division/department:	Metro Transit, Service Development

Proposed action

That the Metropolitan Council authorize the suspension of Northstar Commuter Rail service pursuant to all applicable contracts, agreements, easements, and licenses, and approves enhanced bus service serving the Northstar Corridor within the seven-county Metropolitan area to be incorporated in Network Now.

Background

Northstar Commuter Rail (“Northstar”) service began in 2009 operating between Big Lake and Target Field Station near Downtown Minneapolis. Big Lake and Elk River are outside the Council’s statutory operating area for regular transit service – Minnesota Statutes, section 473.121, subd. 2; and section 473.123, subd. 1. Commuter rail service to these communities is authorized under Minnesota Statutes, section 174.90; and section 473.4057 subd. 2.

Northstar is a rush-hour, commuter-oriented service. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it operated 12 daily trips on weekdays and six daily trips on weekends. Today, it operates four trips per direction on weekdays, three peak-direction trips and one reverse-commute trip. Limited service is provided for downtown events, such as Twins games at Target Field. Under the Council’s contract with BNSF Railway, midday and evening trips are prohibited, limiting options to expand and adapt Northstar service to current travel patterns.

Prior to the pandemic, Northstar Commuter Rail served 2,660 average weekday riders, less than half of the projected 2025 ridership. Ridership was reduced approximately 95% by the pandemic. During the first half of 2025, average daily ridership remained below 500. The 2023 subsidy per ride was \$116.60, compared to \$16.07 for commuter express bus service in 2023.

The high cost of the service and decline in market lead to developing a bus service alternative which was the subject of public engagement during April-May 2025. Four public meetings were held, and 1,455 comments were received. Many riders accessing Big Lake and Elk River stations

do not favor discontinuing service at those stations, downtown commuters preferred increase in service during rush hour and midday.

Metro Transit recommends suspension of Northstar Commuter Rail service and replacing it with enhanced bus service within the seven-County Metropolitan Area. Under state statute, the Council cannot operate bus service to Big Lake and Elk River. MNDOT has authority to provide service outside of seven-county Metropolitan area.

Replacement Service Plan

Service to the cities of Ramsey, Anoka, and Coon Rapids will be provided by the new all-day express bus Route 888 providing 30-minute peak direction and hourly bidirectional service on weekdays from approximately 5 am to 7 pm. Sixteen trips per direction per weekday will be provided, a 400% increase over current Northstar service levels and a 266% increase over pre-pandemic service. Route 889 will provide three trips per direction on Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays. These trips are timed to serve mid-day and evening events in Downtown Minneapolis.

Service to Fridley will be provided by Route 827, currently operated as Route 852. Route 827 replaces the existing Route 852, serving Fridley Station and operating via East River Road to downtown Minneapolis every 30 minutes rush hour and hourly midday on weekdays, hourly on Saturdays. Fridley Station is also adjacent to University Avenue served by Routes 10 (future METRO F Line) and 824.

Both Routes 888 and 827 will serve the Marquette and 2nd Avenues in downtown Minneapolis, removing need to transfer to get to the downtown core. Northstar corridor customers who travel beyond downtown would have many connections, including major transitways such as Blue, Green, and Orange Lines, and C and D Lines.

Public engagement

The proposed commuter rail to bus service transition plan was subject of public meetings attended by more than 175 people:

In-person:

- Tuesday, April 29, 5 p.m. to 7:00 p.m., Anoka City Hall
- Wednesday, May 7, 4:30 p.m., Onboard northbound train Target Field Station
- Thursday, May 8, 5:00 p.m. to 6:30 p.m., Mississippi Library, Fridley

On-line:

- Wednesday, April 30, 5:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m.

1,455 responses to on-line and paper surveys were collected and informed adjustments to recommended bus service schedule start and end times, and addition of weekend service.

Title VI Analyses

Title VI requires the Council to analyze major service changes for potential disparate impact and disproportionate burden (DI/BD). The analyses calculate the number of transit trips available and the change in fare to the **residents home location** in the affected corridor. The results indicate that there is potential for DI/BD due to the proposed service changes.

According to Council policy OEEO 6-2, if DI/DB is found, “the FTA requires recipients to analyze alternatives... A transit provider may proceed with the proposed change if there is substantial legitimate justification, and no legitimate alternatives exist with a less disparate impact that still accomplish the provider’s legitimate program goals.”

This Title VI analysis methodology evaluated routes specific to the Northstar commuter rail to bus transition, and includes new service on East River Road. New East River Road service was included in the Network Now system wide evaluation showing no disparate impact or disproportionate burden. The analysis does not account for change in market demand (midday

service), travel time, service reliability or vehicle type changes. The proposed service plan aims to provide an increase trip offering and all day, while travel times may be slower for some customers, and the ride quality different. Therefore, staff recommends implementation of the recommended plan.

Fiscal Impact

Suspend Northstar operating budget of \$18.6 million (2025).

Routes 888 and improvements to Route 827 (former Route 852) will result in new operating costs of approximately \$3,500,000 in 2026.

The net operating impact will be a long-term reduction in annual operating costs.

Rationale

Suspending Northstar Commuter Rail and replacement by enhanced bus service allows the Council to end a high-subsidy, low-ridership service with an expanded service better suited to current travel patterns.

Thrive lens analysis

On Feb. 12, 2025, the Council adopted Imagine 2050, which builds on policy direction in Thrive MSP 2040. Under the Thrive lens, the proposed action supports **Stewardship** by suspending a high-subsidy, low-ridership service and providing additional service at a reduced cost and **Prosperity** by replacing a peak-only, commuter-focused service with all day, bidirectional service.

Funding

Operating funding for Routes 888 and 827 will be provided out of Metro Transit's existing bus operating budget.

Small business inclusion

There are no direct impacts to small business with this action.