

Northstar Rail Corridor Post-Pandemic Study

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Transportation Committee

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Background



Northstar Commuter Rail

Existing Service

- Commuter rail service -- Big Lake to Minneapolis (40 miles)
- Operated by Metro Transit, BNSF -- opened in Nov. 2009
- Peak-oriented commuter service and special events (2009-2019)

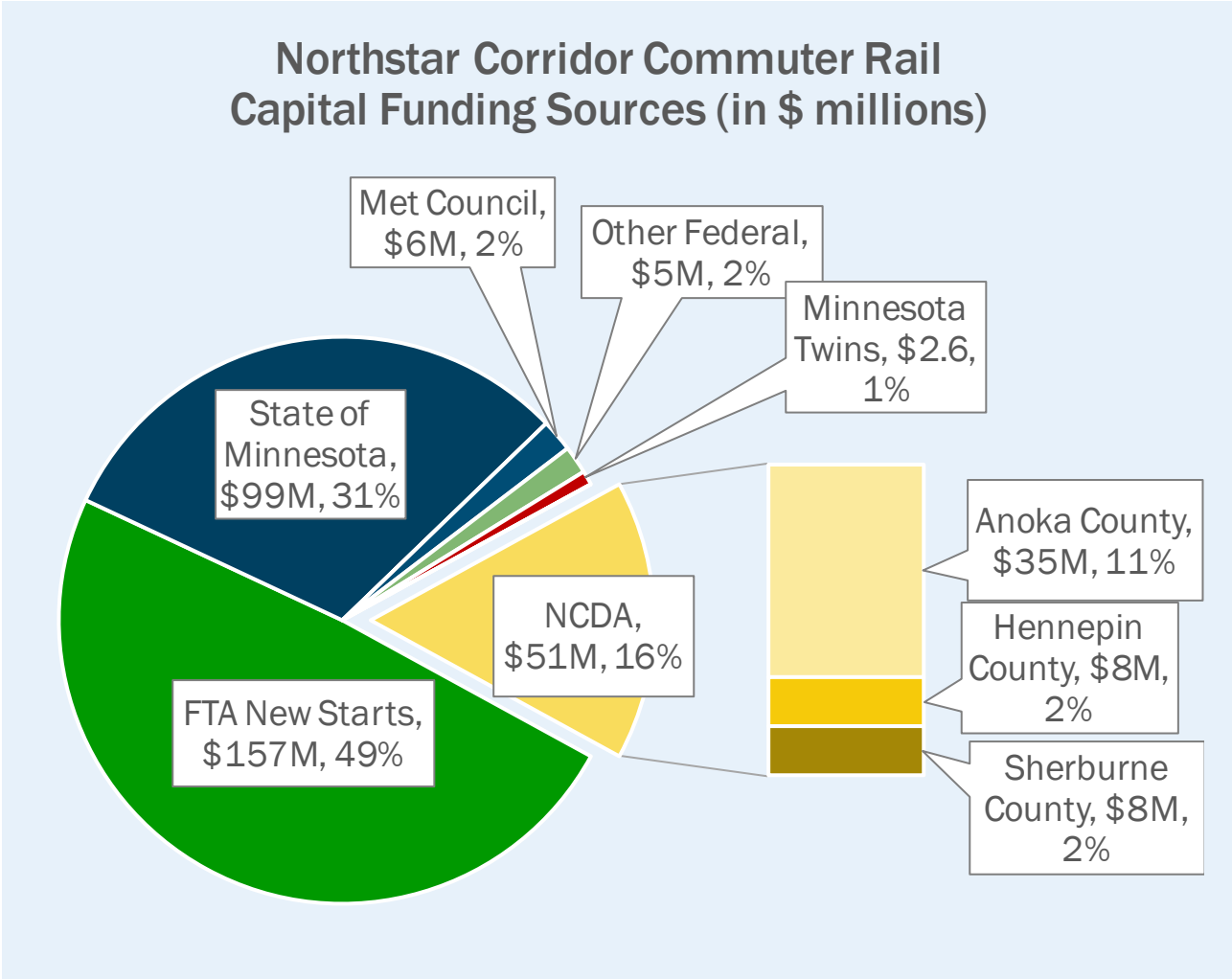
Project Development

- Commuter rail to St. Cloud identified as need in MnDOT study in 1998
- During environmental process, route was cut back from St. Cloud to Big Lake for federal funding eligibility and political reasons
- Developed through local, state, federal partnership and led by local governments
- Constructed by MnDOT (2007-2009)

Background (2)

Northstar Capital Cost History

- Original capital investment: \$320M
- Funding partners:
 - Federal Transit Admin (FTA)
 - State of Minnesota (MnDOT)
 - Metropolitan Council
 - Minnesota Twins
 - Northstar Corridor Development Authority (NCDA)
 - Anoka County (68.3%)
 - Hennepin County (15.6%)
 - Sherburne County (16.1%)

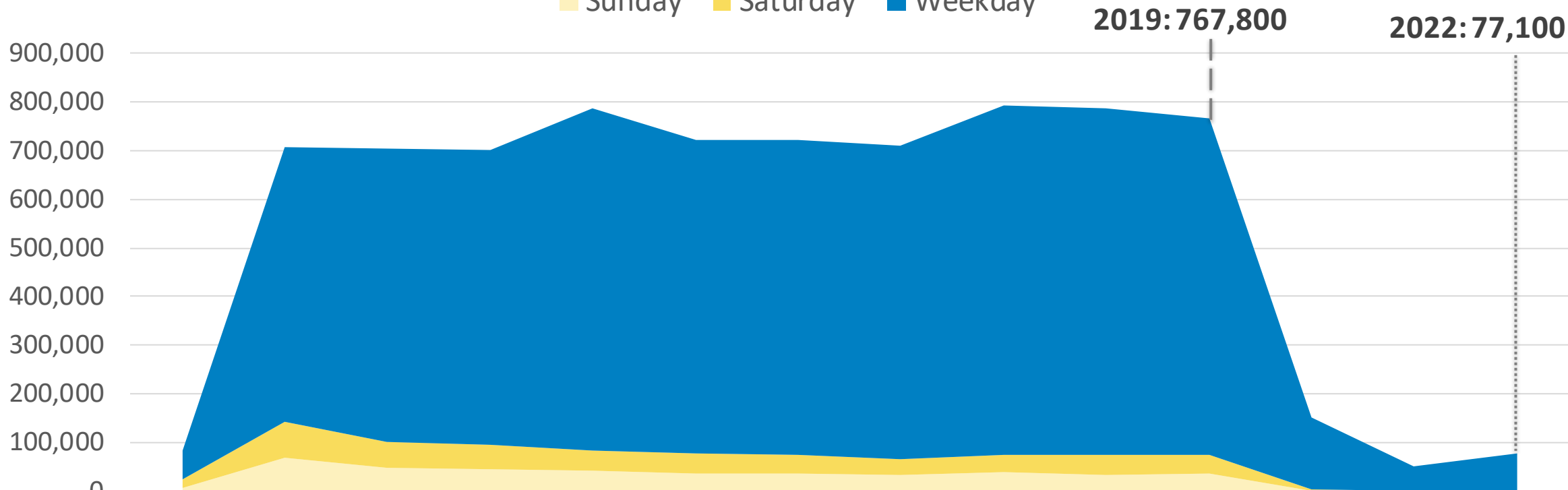


Background (3)

Northstar Annual Ridership, 2009 to 2022

Annual Ridership by Day Type

■ Sunday
 ■ Saturday
 ■ Weekday



2019: 767,800

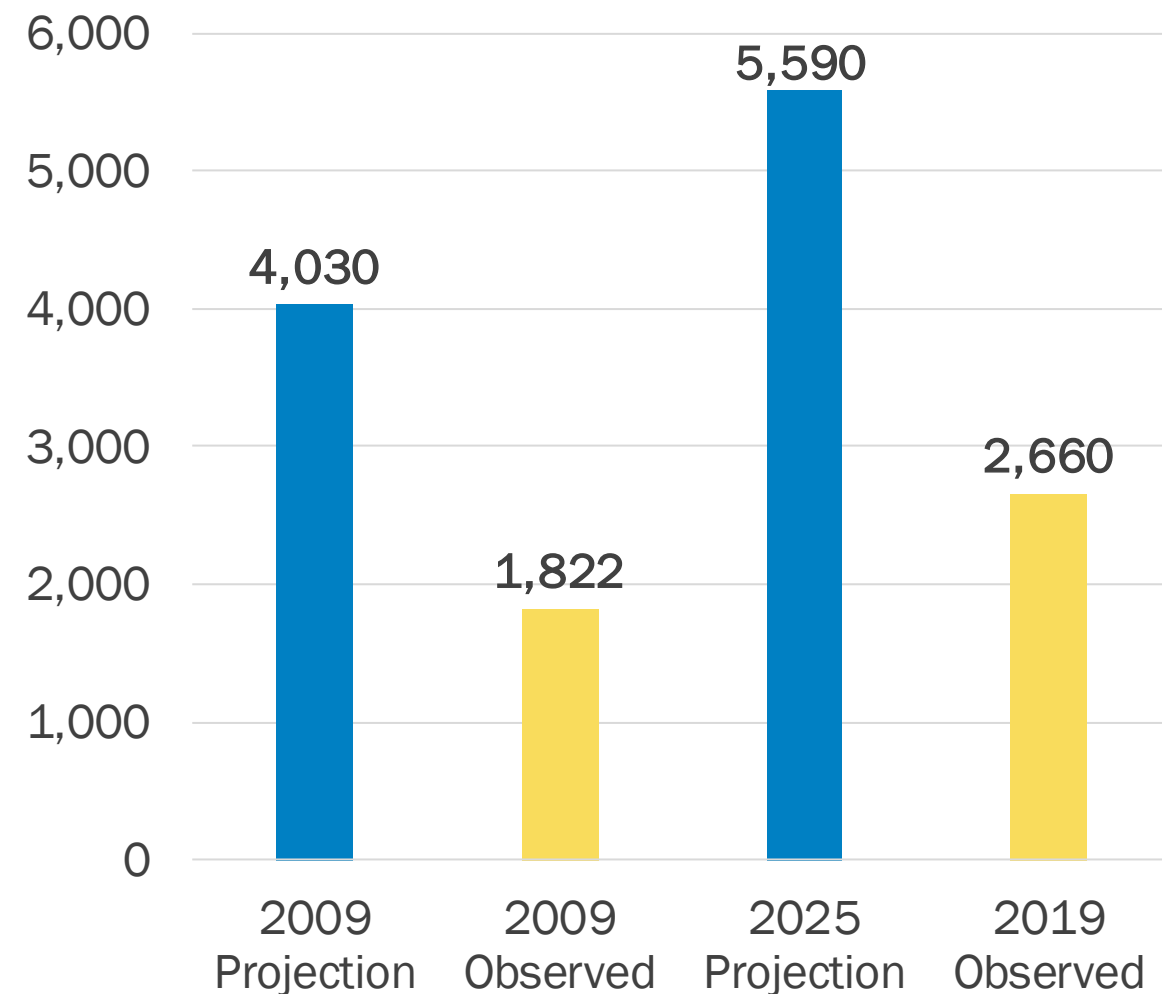
2022: 77,100

	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
■ Weekday	58,320	562,893	601,581	604,329	704,243	643,346	646,180	644,452	719,069	712,432	694,388	148,017	50,433	77,076
■ Saturday	16,439	74,739	55,527	51,030	42,258	41,892	39,345	31,212	35,900	40,613	37,481	2,429	0	0
■ Sunday	7,523	68,888	46,318	44,917	40,739	35,976	36,250	33,712	38,827	34,283	35,898	1,697	0	0

Background ⁽⁴⁾

Original Ridership Forecasts (circa 2007)

- Actual ridership less than half of original projections
- Service plan used for forecasts included some additional trips relative to implementation
- Ridership building strategies included new connecting bus routes, extensive promotion of service and transit passes

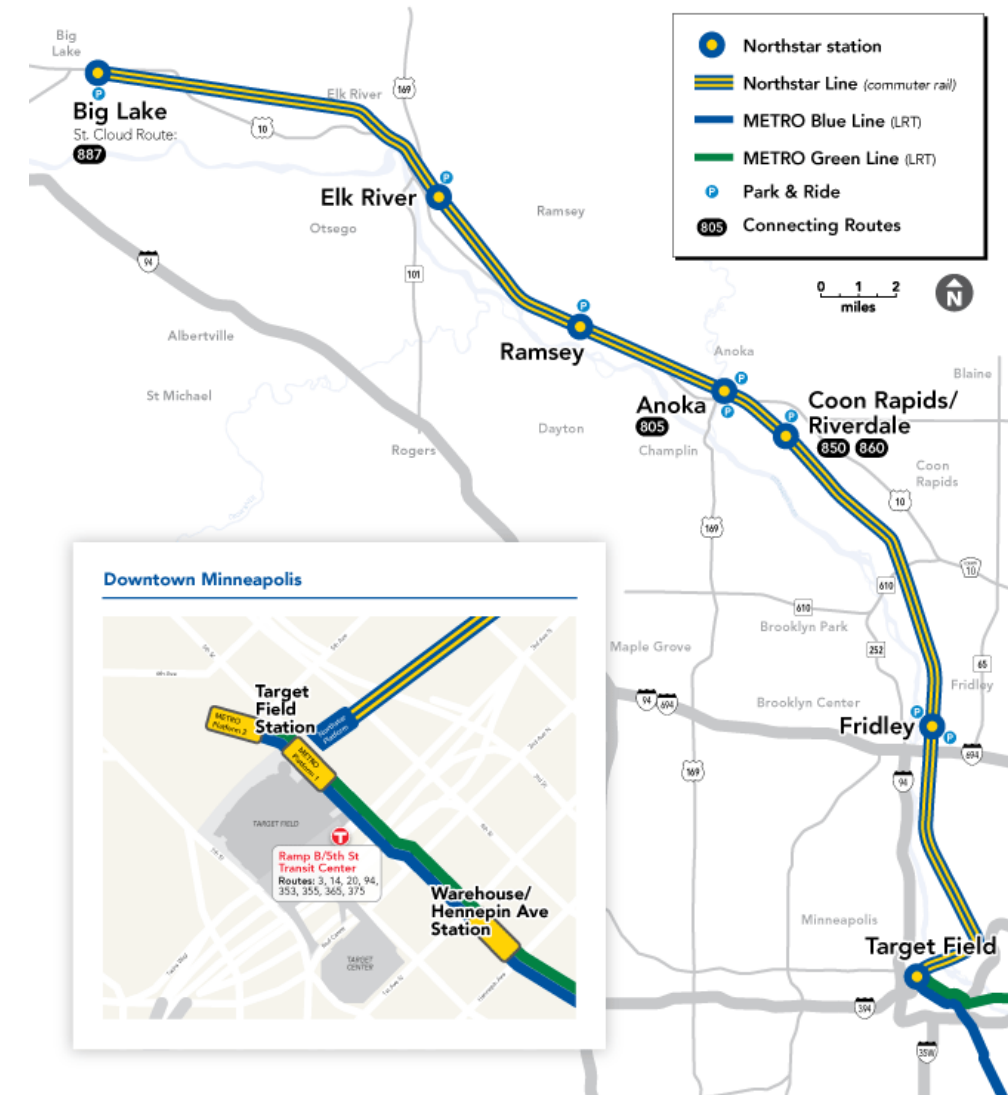


Background (5)

Study Scope

- Documentation of corridor history and existing conditions
- Peer rail corridor comparisons
- Development of transit service operating scenarios
- Evaluation of service scenarios
- Considerations for decision making

Study's purpose is to analyze transit service scenarios to inform future decisions; it is not intended to identify or select a preferred alternative or transit service type.



Peer Corridors Review

Northstar's Peer Rail Corridors

Corridors Reviewed

- **Downeaster** (Portland, Maine to Boston, Intercity/Commuter Rail hybrid service)
- **Frontrunner** (Salt Lake City, Commuter Rail)
- **Sounder** (Seattle, Commuter Rail)
- **COASTER** (San Diego, Commuter Rail)
- **Trinity Railway Express** (Dallas/Fort Worth, Commuter Rail)



Peer Corridors Review (2)

Northstar's Peer Rail Corridors

Key Comparisons

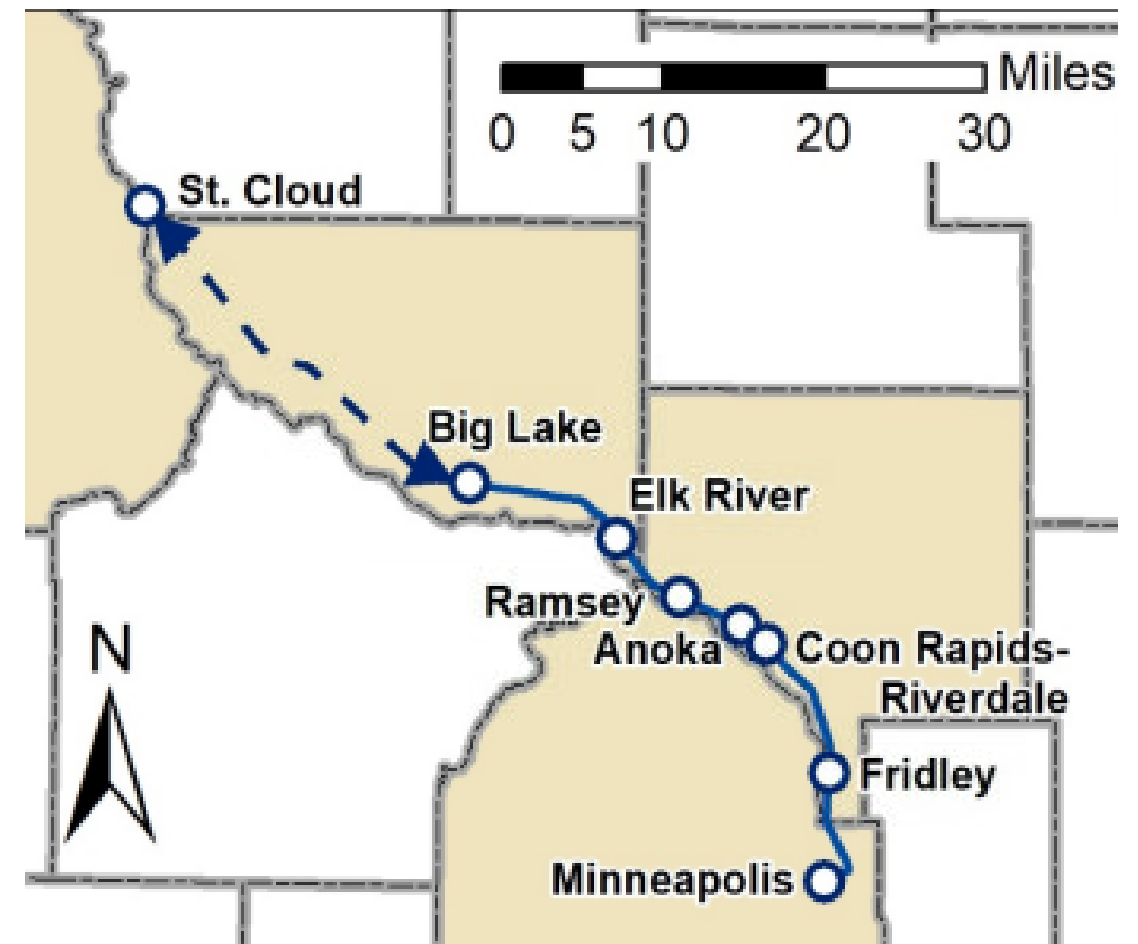
- Northstar has lower ridership than peers, but comparable productivity (riders per hour)
- Northstar has highest per-passenger subsidy and lowest fare recovery
- Most rail agencies have restored more service since 2020 while others seek to expand
- Generally in the U.S., intercity rail has seen greater recovery in pandemic era than commuter rail service



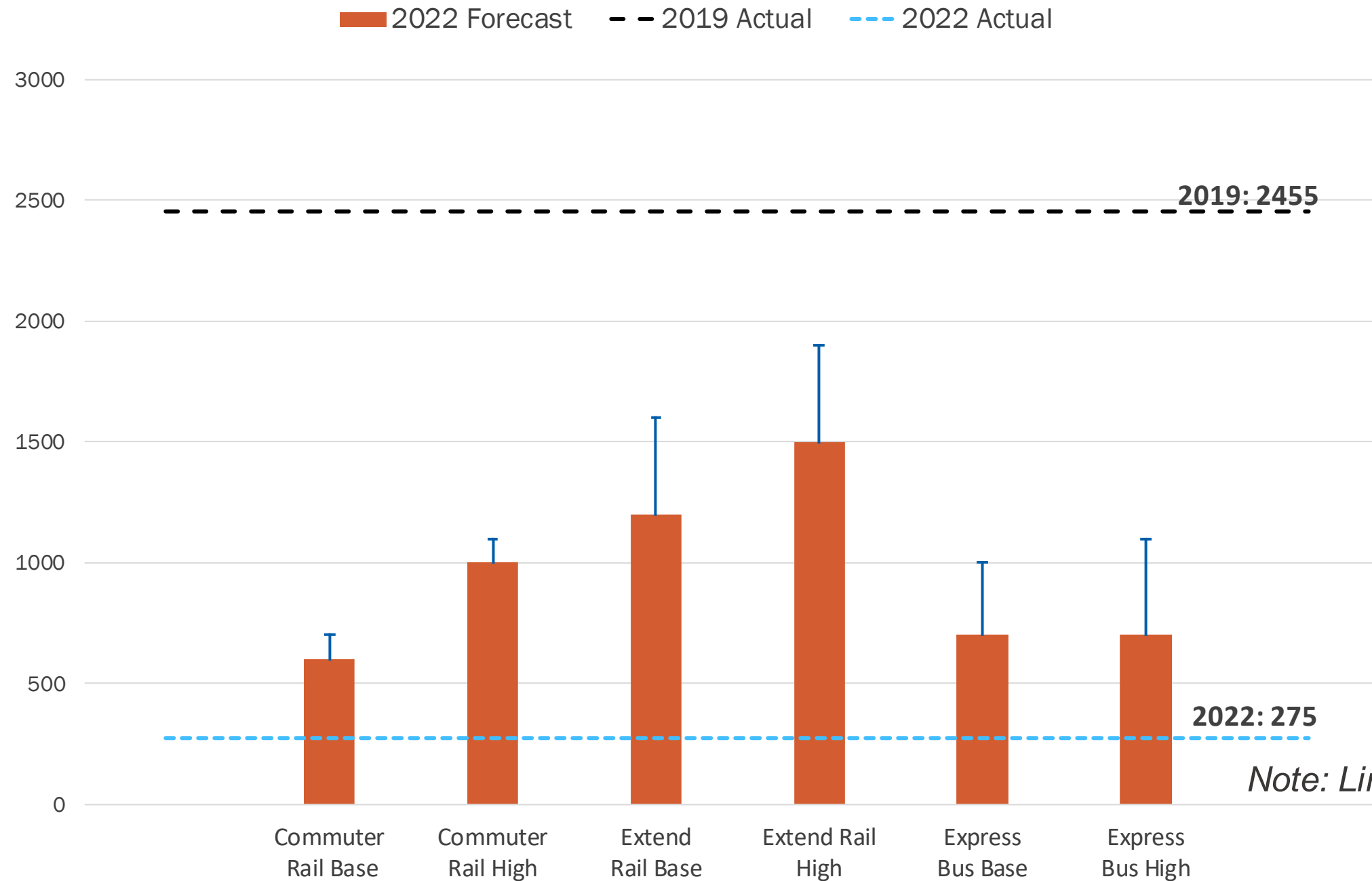
Scenarios Analyzed

Transit Service Scenarios Analyzed

1. Commuter Rail--Base, at current service level (4 trips per day + restore special events)
2. Commuter Rail--High, at pre-Covid service level (12 trips per day + special events)
3. Extend Rail Service to St. Cloud--Base (4 trips per day)
4. Extend Rail Service to St. Cloud--High (9 trips per day)
5. Express Bus--Base (replace rail service with 30-min peak commuter)
6. Express Bus--High (replace rail service with 15-min peak commuter)



2040 Ridership Forecasts



Financial and Ridership Results

Evaluation Category	Northstar Actuals (2022)	Commuter Rail Base	Commuter Rail High	Extend Rail Base	Extend Rail High	Express Bus Base	Express Bus High
Capital Costs (2025\$)	N/A	None	None	\$36M+*	\$67M+*	\$7M	\$13M
Risk of FTA Repayment	N/A	Unlikely	Unlikely	Possible	Possible	Likely (est. ~ \$75M)	Likely (est. ~ \$75M)
Annual Operating Costs (2023\$)	\$11.9M	\$12M	\$23M	\$17M+*	\$26M+*	\$2M	\$3.5M
Ridership Potential (# of weekday riders)	275	600	1,000	1,200	1,500	700	700
Subsidy per Passenger	est. \$150	\$60	\$67	\$41	\$52	\$8	\$14

*Costs for Extending Rail to St. Cloud scenarios are preliminary and could increase depending on future project decisions and operating arrangements.

Green shading denotes better-than-median values of all scenarios.

Gray shading denotes median values among all scenarios.

Red shading denotes worse-than-median values of all scenarios.

Other Evaluation Factors

Evaluation Criteria	Commuter Rail	Extend Rail	Express Bus
Accessibility and Equity*	Moderate	High	Low
Community Development Potential*	Moderate	Moderate	Low
Environmental Sustainability*	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate

* Full quantitative results for these evaluation categories are available in the Final Report.

Next Steps in Decision-Making Process

Stakeholder Conversations

Funding Partners

- Additional questions and/or study needed?
- Level of interest in continuing funding
- Coordinate with MnDOT rail planning

Corridor Cities

- Station-area investments
- Support for corridor service types/scenarios
- Potential funding partnerships

Policymakers

- Public engagement and analysis needs
- Pros/cons of corridor scenarios and levels of service
- Other considerations

Federal and Railroad Involvement

FTA Conversations

- Funding opportunities
- Potential repayment requirements

FRA/Amtrak/BNSF

- Potential for rail extension including possible conversion to Amtrak service
- Identifying capital improvements or expenditures needed
- Ridership/revenue forecasting refinements
- Funding opportunities

Further Analysis

Survey Research and Engagement

- Corridor-specific market surveys to determine customer preferences
- Annual on-board transit surveys
- Analysis of pandemic-era travel patterns and transit demand

Schedule Optimization

- Consideration of transit for commute markets and potential for all-day service

Funding

- Review of potential funding sources for each transit service type

PREFERRED OPTION SELECTED

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