

POLITICS IN MINNESOTA

The I-94 Corridor Commission aims to attract mass transit to the east metro ASAP

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The squeaky wheel gets the grease, and that's why the I-94 Corridor Commission needs to move now to get the word out about the corridor and its transit potential, says Gary Kriesel, chair of the commission and vice chair of the Washington County Commission. (Staff photo: Bill Klotz)

Washington County is getting serious about improving transportation on the I-94 corridor.

Last year the county formed the I-94 Corridor Commission to begin exploring transportation options that might include light rail, buses or some combination of the two to create a more vibrant selection of transportation choices.

The commission recently awarded Bloomington-based Tunheim Partners a \$50,000 contract—the cost split between Ramsey and Washington counties—to change its name and to create a marketing and civic engagement plan.

Next up — and much more important — is a \$1.1 million study in the request-for-proposal stage that will collect traffic and commuter data and examine different transit options for the corridor.

The options will range from light rail transit (LRT) on an existing right-of-way on I-94 to high-speed buses and improved park-and-rides, says Ted Schoenecker, transportation planning manager for Washington County.

The results of that report, expected to take more than a year, will guide the commission's vision for an I-94 corridor transit way.

"The end game is to have a higher level of transportation options in the corridor," Schoenecker says. "We now can't say whether it's LRT, or bus or commuter rail. The study will give us the data that support the mode, the alignment, the stops and the cost."

Members of the commission include representatives from Ramsey and Washington counties, St. Paul, Maplewood, Woodbury, Oakdale, Lake Elmo, Afton, Lakeland and West Lakeland Township. Several businesses and groups are ex-officio (nonvoting) members, among them 3M and the Woodbury Chamber of Commerce.

"Getting that group together was really the first step; the second was the Tunheim contract, to say who are we, who are the stakeholders, how do we communicate with residents and the business community," he says.

"Any major project, whether it's a transit line or a major highway, requires a lot of engagement with the community."

Schoenecker points out that I-94 has produced several similar corridor organizations, among them one on the stretch around Maple Grove and another with a virtually identical name covering five northwest Wisconsin counties that seeks to complement the work of its Minnesota counterpart.

A small part of Tunheim's charge is to arrive at a moniker that doesn't sound like those of the other organizations — the rest of the contract deals with branding the corridor, developing and managing its website, and increasing I-94's visibility.

Why now?

Because the corridor's park-and-ride lots are overflowing and the traffic counts are comparable to the busiest intersections in the west metro, Schoenecker says: The I-94/694 intersection carries roughly the same volume as the I-94/Maple Grove stretch of highway.

Another reason for the transit push is that the corridor is not slated for any improvements in MnDOT's 2030 improvement plan for the region, says Gary Kriesel, chair of the I-94 Corridor Commission and vice chair of the Washington County Commission.

“Once we get this economy moving again congestion is only going to grow,” Kriesel says.

The interest in transit has been high among business groups and government agencies in Washington County, as 3M and others are onboard to help support transit.

“If we get a good diversity of transit options, it will certainly attract a varied and mobile workforce for major employers like 3M,” Kriesel says. “The oil catastrophe in the Gulf [of Mexico] tells us that we have to look at different transportation models than gas and oil.”

The linchpin of all east metro transportation efforts will be St. Paul’s downtown Union Depot, says Ramsey County Commissioner and I-94 Corridor Commission member Rafael Ortega.

Set to undergo a major renovation, the depot will be the final stop on the Central Corridor, as well as well as on proposed routes such as the heavy rail Red Rock and Rush lines and the mixed-transit Robert Street line, he says.

LRT or bus rapid transit could be added down I-94 depending on the outcome of the transit study report. Ortega believes an I-94 corridor line could leapfrog at least one or two of the proposed lines in the west metro, most likely the proposed Bottineau Corridor through north Minneapolis and northwest Hennepin County to Maple Grove.

The other proposed line, the Southwest Corridor, is moving faster toward reality, Ortega concedes. (The Metropolitan Council approved the Southwest Corridor LRT on May 26.)

But if I-94 could finish planning within three to five years, he says, “we could” jump ahead of Bottineau. “We want to push to get into the cue.”

With a growing population and a desire by many county residents to maintain their rural ambience, a transit corridor where higher-density development can take place makes sense, Ortega says.

Commission member and Woodbury Chamber of Commerce representative Greg Watson buys that argument.

“I work and have been involved in Woodbury and the [Woodbury] Chamber of Commerce going on eight years,” says Watson, who lives in rural Denmark Township.

“I office in Woodbury, so I have the best of both worlds — a vibrant urban environment that I thrive and work in before I go home to my rural residential hideaway.

“I’m the first one to say I don’t ever want to see that go away, but if we don’t look forward and take this opportunity to utilize the 94 corridor we are going to lose both of those things.”

Watson cites statistics other than just commuter traffic numbers to highlight the pressures on the corridor: More than 84 percent of all freight coming into the Twin Cities uses the corridor, and it manages 45 percent of all border bridge traffic coming into Minnesota from Wisconsin.

The advantage to doing planning now is that I-94 is a “blank slate” that can be designed to better serve residents and employers along it, Watson says. The corridor could attract more business and residential development with transit options in place to manage that growth.

Woodbury’s mayor and commission vice-chair Bill Hargis would like to see more investment in transit on the east side because his community alone is expected to grow from 60,000 to 90,000 residents by 2030.

Without more transit options, Woodbury and Washington County could become less desirable “places to live and to have a business,” he says.

In marshaling public support, Hargis says larger businesses are supportive but he and other leaders will have to make a stronger case to small and medium-size firms that may need some convincing before embracing more extensive forms of transit.

In fact, transit in Washington County has been a hard sell. After many contentious debates, Washington became the fifth of seven metro counties to apply a quarter-cent sales tax that collectively raised \$88 million last year that’s to be spent on transit projects. That affirmed the county’s commitment to become part a larger effort to build a metrowide transit system.

Driving that desire is growing congestion and a general sense that the auto culture is on its last set of wheels. Watson, like Kriesel, says the oil spill in the Gulf may be the beginning of the end of the age of an economy and a lifestyle based on gasoline.

“You can’t look at the Gulf today and say we aren’t reaching the end of the technology that is fossil fuel,” Watson says. But the need will still exist to move people around the metro area through alternative means other than cars “and now’s the time to start working on it.”