

FINANCE & COMMERCE

8 transit options under review for Gateway Corridor

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Next system could run from Minneapolis to Eau Claire

Some 90,000 vehicles cross from Wisconsin into Minnesota along Interstate 94 Gateway Corridor each day, according to recent studies. By the time the corridor reaches downtown St. Paul, the number of vehicles increases to 150,000. Population along the corridor, now estimated at 300,000, is growing fast.

To Lake Elmo Mayor Dean Johnston, the reason for doing long-term planning for a new transit corridor from Minneapolis to Eau Claire, Wis., is pretty simple.

It's to keep the taxpayers happy - whether or not they realize it in the beginning.

What makes for unhappy taxpayers is when problems aren't anticipated and solved before they happen - gridlock is a perfect example, said Johnston, the city's mayor since 2004 and vice chairman of the Gateway Corridor Commission.

The Gateway Corridor follows Interstate 94 the 90 or so miles from Minneapolis to Eau Claire, Wis. The proposed project is now in what's called the alternative analysis phase, which should wrap up by May.

But the road to a Gateway transit corridor has not been without potholes. At first, more than a few east metro leaders were skeptical about spending money - the alternative analysis is costing \$1.5 million - on such long-range planning. Some remain skeptical about the need for a transit corridor in the first place.

Next week, two open houses will attempt to answer the public's questions.

Johnston, whose city has long been considered a bit isolationist in its drive to protect its open space, disagrees with the skeptics. He thinks that different sections of the Minneapolis-Eau Claire trip need different types of transit to thrive economically.

It's easy for people to say they are against light rail, Johnston said. The question is, are they against light rail between Hudson [Wis.] and Eau Claire? Well, I am, too.

But am I against light rail between Minneapolis and St. Paul? No. Light rail has become the biggest stimulus for economic development for that region. That was the right solution, he said, referring to the nearly \$1 billion Central Corridor line under construction.

Johnston added that it's not appropriate to be against a specific mode of transportation until you've looked at the needs and costs.

Gateway Corridor backers point to growing population along the route, and the number of large companies like Maplewood-based 3M Co., Ecolab and Securian Financial, both in St. Paul, that are located in the corridor or rely on it.

They also point to two recent studies by MnDOT that concluded the already congested I-94 corridor will worsen without new transportation capacity - studies that are helping increase support for the effort.

Some 90,000 vehicles cross from Wisconsin into Minnesota along I-94's Gateway Corridor each day. By the time the corridor reaches downtown St. Paul, the number of vehicles increases to 150,000. Population along the corridor, now estimated at 300,000, is growing fast.

The support out there for this is becoming strong, said Ramsey County Commissioner Rafael Ortega, a member of the Gateway Corridor Commission. A lot of mayors that were skeptical have become champions.

Recently, the corridor commission decided to add an eighth transit option for detailed study based on recommendations from its policy advisory committee, as well as comments received at four public open houses held in February and March.

It's kind of neat to think the public open houses are doing their job, said Lisa Weik, chairwoman of the Gateway commission and a commissioner of the Washington County Board. We don't just listen - we act on what the public suggests.

The options under study are:

- » Express buses from St. Paul-Minneapolis to Woodbury;
- » Express buses from St. Paul-Minneapolis to Eau Claire;
- » Bus rapid transit from Minneapolis to Hudson on I-94;
- » Bus rapid transit from Minneapolis to Hudson through St. Paul's East Side;
- » Light rail transit from St. Paul to Hudson on I-94;
- » Light rail transit from St. Paul to Hudson through St. Paul's East Side;
- » Commuter rail from Minneapolis to Eau Claire;
- » Buses in managed lanes from St. Paul/Minneapolis to Hudson on I-94.

The Gateway Corridor Commission is hosting two informational open houses next week - one from 5 to 7 p.m. Tuesday at Woodbury City Hall, 8301 Valley Creek Road; the other from 5 to 7 p.m. Thursday at Metro State University in St. Paul, 645 E. Seventh St., in the Ecolab Community Room.

The commission held two open houses this week in Hudson and Eau Claire.

For the \$1.5 million alternative analysis, Washington County kicked in \$550,000; Ramsey County, \$500,000; the Federal Transit Administration (FTA), \$250,000, and the Metropolitan Council, \$200,000.

The St. Paul office of Englewood, Colo.-based consultant firm CH2M Hill has the \$1.5 million contract to analyze the alternatives, said Ted Schoenecker, transportation planning manager for Washington County and project manager of the Gateway Corridor Commission.

The study will decide whether the project should move forward - it could decide on a no-build alternative.

If the study decides the project should move forward, it will produce what is known as a locally preferred alternative route and, in this case, a combination of types of transit, by next spring, Schoenecker said.

The local preference would have to be approved and adopted by the Metropolitan Council before the project could start its draft environmental impact statement, which takes 18 to 24 months, Schoenecker said.

After the draft environmental study is done, the project could then ask the FTA for permission to enter preliminary engineering.

For comparison's sake, the Southwest Corridor light rail transit project is awaiting FTA approval to enter preliminary engineering.

Gateway backers say if all goes well, construction of a new transitway corridor would be finished in 10 years or so.

%We need to study the different needs of the different sections over the next 20 years, so we can anticipate those needs and keep them from becoming problems where we have to be reactive,+ Johnston said.