

[Gateway Corridor line should be next, backers say](#)

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By Matt M. Johnson

The Gateway Corridor's Wisconsin-Minnesota connection is problematic, since planners determined that the I-94 bridge over the St. Croix River lacks space to accommodate trains or a bus lane.

Transit in the Interstate 94 corridor is picking up speed.

The so-called **Gateway Corridor** has been the subject of a \$1.5 million route and ridership study since last summer. Planned to move commuters living along I-94 by bus, light rail, or high-speed commuter rail, Gateway is contending for hundreds of millions of dollars in federal funding.

One of four planned metro-area transit projects on the boards, Gateway moved alongside the west metro Bottineau Corridor this week as early ridership and cost estimates cropped up.

It was something Gateway booster and Ramsey County Commissioner Jim McDonough telegraphed earlier this month while talking about Gateway at the Metropolitan Council's State of the Region event.

"We're accelerating," McDonough said.

Planned to run due east as far as Eau Claire, Wis., from a planned downtown St. Paul origin, Gateway's final form will be chosen from one of eight possibilities. An alternatives study by the Maple Grove office of Portland, Ore.-based consultant CH2M Hill will narrow the choices to one by May or June. That means the area's top transit agency – the Metropolitan Council – will have both Gateway's and Bottineau's routes to consider for adoption into its transportation policy plan by year's end.

The projects could remain neck-and-neck until they apply for construction funding through the **Federal Transit Administration**. Gateway is scheduled to apply for federal funding in 2014, while Bottineau is expected to pursue federal money in 2013. The FTA provides up to 50 percent of the construction costs for approved transit projects.

Preliminary numbers from the CH2M Hill show that Gateway will cost between \$440 million and \$1.3 billion, depending on the transit type and the length of the route. Ted Schoenecker, the transportation planning manager leading the Gateway project, said buses or trains would carry between 18,000 and 28,000 passengers a day.

Construction is planned to begin in 2019, with operations beginning no later than 2021.

The St. Paul-to-Eau Claire option would make for a 90-mile transit route. If Wisconsin declines to participate, Schoenecker said the project would be scaled back to a roughly

20-mile route from St. Paul to Woodbury. The Wisconsin-Minnesota connection is problematic, since Gateway planners determined that the I-94 bridge over the St. Croix River lacks space to accommodate trains or a bus lane.

Additionally, Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker showed himself as an opponent of federal transit funding in 2010 when he turned down money for a Milwaukee-to-Madison high-speed rail line.

McDonough, meanwhile, wants to see the Gateway Corridor become the top transit priority after the Southwest Corridor light-rail transit (LRT) line. That latter corridor – which is expected to begin operations in 2018 — would serve the southwest suburbs.

McDonough has argued that the transit system's next expansion to be in the east metro.

"It's as strong as Southwest and stronger than Bottineau," he said during a Dec. 6 St. Paul Area Chamber of Commerce event at the University of Minnesota. Southwest is predicted to carry 29,660 riders a day, while Bottineau might carry 23,500.

Schoenecker doesn't see the two projects as rivals.

"One of the benefits the region does have now is that it's successfully delivered projects to date," Schoenecker said, referring to the completed Hiawatha LRT and soon-to-be-completed Central Corridor LRT.

The FTA's 2012 capital investment program shows that regions with simultaneous transit projects do get equal consideration. Salt Lake City received the agency's recommendation for funding for two projects this year, one light rail and one commuter rail. Houston is expected to receive funding for two concurrently built LRT lines.

Gateway and Bottineau may not remain on similar timelines. Bottineau is planned to begin construction in 2016, and begin operations three years ahead of Gateway.

After Gateway's preferred route alternative is recommended to the Met Council, the body has six months to consider adding it to its transportation policy plan. During those six months, project planners will begin preparing a draft environmental impact statement. The 18-month, \$3 million study is a requirement for applying for funding.

Ramsey County and the Counties Transit Improvement Board provided the funding.

The Gateway project will hold its third and final set of public open houses concerning the route alternatives in March or April. They will be held in Woodbury, St. Paul, Hudson, Wis., and Eau Claire, Wis.

Get Gateway info

Gateway Corridor planners will give a presentation about the progress of the planned transit project at a meeting Friday sponsored by the St. Paul Area Chamber of Commerce. The meeting begins at 11:30 a.m. at Globe University in Woodbury. RSVP at the chamber's website, or call 651-223-5000.