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Editorial: A vision for growth and transit in the east metro



Train operator David Nelson practices driving a train under the watchful eye of rail instructor Rolland Green, bottom right, at the MetroTransit Light Rail Operations & Maintenance Facility in Minneapolis on Thursday, June 5, 2014. (Pioneer Press: Ben Garvin)

By **PIONEER PRESS EDITORIAL BOARD**

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We have a lot going for us in St. Paul and the east metro.

A new report says we need more transit investment to make the most of it and secure our future.

The “Vision of Growth” from East Metro Strong — the coalition formed to advance a unified approach to the transit future in Ramsey, Dakota and Washington counties — provides a useful framework for strategic thinking.

Focusing on proposed transit corridors and the assets in their paths, it highlights forecast growth while issuing a warning: We won’t achieve projections without becoming more “transit-served” and more walkable.

The corridors in development — beyond the Green Line already connecting downtown St. Paul and Minneapolis — serve as spokes radiating from a downtown St. Paul hub at Union Depot: the Gold Line along the Gateway Corridor to the east; Riverview to the airport and Mall of America; Rush Line, north to Forest Lake; Red Rock, connecting St. Paul and Hastings; and Robert Street, south through West St. Paul. The east metro also would be served by a proposed extension of the Red Line in Dakota County south to Lakeville.

The “vision area” around the corridors covers just 20 percent of the east metro’s three-county total land area, according to the report, but contains more than half of the three counties’ current households and jobs, forming “a substantial foundation of transit-friendly neighborhoods that the vision and local plans can build upon,” according to the report.

Will Schroeer, executive director of East Metro Strong, highlights growth projected between now and 2040 in the east metro counties: up to 393,000 new residents and up to 159,000 new jobs.

Significantly, most of that growth between 2010 and 2040 will take place in the vision area around the corridors: 172,000 new residents (59 percent of all new east metro residents in the three counties) and 105,000 new jobs (66 percent of all new east metro jobs in the three counties), according to the report.

But it warns: “A growth forecast is not a guarantee. If more walkable neighborhoods with transit connections to jobs are not made available in the east metro, people seeking those essentials may instead choose locations in the west metro, or they may choose to move to other regions of the country.”

The report also has a here-and-now message. Its analysis demonstrates that east metro colleges, universities, hospitals, major employers and more are “woefully underserved by transit options,” St. Paul Area Chamber of Commerce President Matt Kramer told us.

He notes the risk in an era of changing demographics and increasing worker shortages: “If you have job concentrations and you artificially limit people’s ability to reach those jobs by virtue of not providing any option other than a car, you have effectively eliminated whole segments of the population who may want that job.”

The vision was formulated by representatives of 23 public and private organizations in a nearly year-long series of workshops involving elected officials, city staff and others who laid out likes and dislikes, local values and thoughts about “how much growth is desirable for realizing vision benefits,” the report said. “For the visioning conversation, participants imagined what they wanted the east metro to look like in the year 2040 if seen from a hot-air balloon, both the sweep of what they saw, and some of the details.”

As a result of a long, thoughtful process, the report “carries a lot of weight,” Gateway Corridor Commission Chair Lisa Weik, a Washington County commissioner, told us. For Gateway, and others, it helps make the case for the return on transit investment.

The vision is aspirational but achievable, the report says, noting that East Metro Strong board members will present it as part of an ongoing conversation about the future of a prosperous east metro.

It’s a welcome conversation.



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