
NEWS

New Gold Line alternative route takes a turn south in Woodbury

By **BOB SHAW** | bshaw@pioneerpress.com

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For the Gold Line bus project, Lake Elmo's loss could be Woodbury's gain.

A new route for the proposed bus-rapid transit line avoids Lake Elmo entirely and bends the route south two miles into Woodbury.

The route announced Thursday by the Gateway Corridor Commission is one of several alternatives that could connect downtown St. Paul to the city's East Side and to Maplewood, Oakdale and Woodbury. The commission is expected to officially pick its preferred route by the end of the year.

The new alternative cuts about two miles off other proposals that would stretch east to Manning Avenue. Instead, it cuts south at Helmo Avenue to Valley Creek Drive.

Buses would travel on a newly built dedicated two-lane road. Officials have not yet given an estimated cost for the new route, but the original was estimated at \$485 million.

In 2015, the route most favored by the commission had its easternmost point in the northeast corner of Woodbury, crossing Interstate 94 and running across Lake Elmo and Oakdale. It was designed so that westbound commuters from Wisconsin could easily get off the freeway and onto rapid-transit buses.

But the Lake Elmo City Council in January banned the rapid-transit buses, fearing they would bring unwanted development.

Since then, planners have developed alternate routes. Two still begin in the northeast part of Woodbury, proceed west, then cross I-94 at Radio Drive or Weir Drive.

The new alternative swaps four miles of east-west road in Lake Elmo or Woodbury for two miles of north-south road into Woodbury.

The route would cross I-94 on a new bridge at Helmo Avenue and run south along Bielenberg Drive to the parking lot of the Woodbury 10 Cinema, which is a park-and-ride.

Washington County Commissioner Lisa Weik, chairwoman of the Gateway commission, said the Gold Line would mean a big improvement in service over current express bus service between Woodbury and downtown St. Paul.

“The biggest complaint I hear is that the express buses don’t run all day,” she said. The new Gold route would feature buses running every 10 minutes during peak times, and somewhat longer intervals in other times.

“You would not even need a schedule,” Weik said.

The plan is a departure from previous routes, which followed I-94. The new route veers into Woodbury, past hotels and shopping centers. It would give access to the Target store on Valley Creek Road.

At a meeting in Woodbury Thursday, commission manager Lyssa Leitner said the new route would put a priority on local service and connections to workplaces, even at the expense of freeway commuters.

“With this, we are putting more focus on jobs,” she said.

Woodbury Mayor Mary Giuliani Stephens, chairwoman of the policy advisory committee of the Gateway Corridor Commission, did not call the new alternative route along Bielenberg her favorite.

“But this one shows a little more promise,” she said.

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Bob Shaw **Bob Shaw**

Bob is a 40-year veteran (yes, he is grizzled) who edited one Pulitzer Prize winner and wrote two that were nominated. He has also worked in Des Moines, Colorado Springs and Palo Alto. He writes about the suburbs, the environment, housing, religion -- anything but politics. Secret pleasures: Kayaking on the Mississippi on the way to work, doughnuts brought in by someone else. Best office prank: Piling more papers onto Fred Melo's already trash-covered desk.

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