



NewsCut

MPR News Reflections and
observations on the news

Politics

East Metro's transit time is coming



Bob Collins January 19, 2018, 3:23 PM



As long time readers of NewsCut might recall, I've wanted mass transit to the Woodbury bureau almost since the day I moved to the great state of Minnesota 26 years ago. As cornfields became shopping centers and neighborhoods, "your time will come" became the mantra of transit experts who had other priorities than the Gold Line, the bus rapid transit route that will connect Woodbury — which has no bus service after 7:50 a.m. — with the civilized world.

But years came and years went and nothing much happened as the state reneged on a plan to help fund the project with bonding, two major transit lines were built, a regional transportation funding scheme came and went, forcing Washington and Ramsey County to try to go it alone.

That's usually a way to kill a good idea, but the two counties have, to their credit, persisted in the wake of opposition to any threat to Minnesota's status as a transit backwater.

Today, however, the Metropolitan Council announced that the Federal Transit Administration has "granted" the Gold Line entrance to the "development phase of the federal New Starts program, which funds major transit projects across the country. The designation means local spending will now be eligible for potential matching federal funds in the future," the Council said in a news release.

Most of the line will run along I-94 before ducking (barely) into Woodbury. Originally it was to include Lake Elmo, but the community voted two years ago to reject the bus line because it would lead to higher-density development in the city. Since then, homes have sprouted so quickly along where the bus was going to run that it might as well be called North Woodbury. Those commuters are on their own.



Despite today's announcement, nothing's going to happen soon. In fact, the completion date is now 2024, two years later than the projected timeline just a couple of years ago of a 2022 opening. Even that thwarted my dream of being able to take transit to work (2022 is well after my retirement), and now there's a slightly less chance that it occurs in my lifetime.

But, the Star Tribune noted today, that doesn't mean that action isn't already happening. Mass transit is as much about economic development as it is moving people. A developer has modified original plans for an office park at the 494/94 intersection and shifted to a mixed-use, transit friendly development, just the kind of thing that scared Lake Elmo but keeps Oakdale chugging along.

"Basically, what we're looking at is anywhere between 700 and 900 units of multifamily housing, around 150,000 square feet of commercial office and maybe 20,000 to 25,000 square feet of retail in this area," Oakdale Community Development Director Bob Streetar told the paper.

That's quite a vote for a project that is still years away.

“All you have to do is look at the current competition for the Amazon headquarters to see that large employers want to locate near modern, efficient transit systems. In today’s world the commute goes both ways,” Washington County Commissioner Stan Karwoski said in a news release. “You have people from the East Metro traveling into the core cities for jobs, as well as people in the rest of the region coming east to work at companies like 3M, or in the medical and hospitality industries in Washington County.”

About the blogger



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Bob Collins has been with Minnesota Public Radio since 1992, emigrating to Minnesota from Massachusetts. He was senior editor of news in the '90s, ran MPR's political unit, created the MPR News regional website, invented the popular Select A Candidate, started the two most popular blogs in the history of MPR and every day laments that his Minnesota Fantasy Legislature project never caught on.

NewsCut is a blog featuring observations about the news. It provides a forum for an online discussion and debate about events that might not typically make the front page. NewsCut posts are not news stories but reflections , observations, and debate.

Featured Comment



Patrick Tice • 3 days ago

Most of us on the east side already know that we are the runt of the litter when it comes to transportation. MNDOT stalled for years instead of replacing the Mississippi River bridge on I-494 when it was really needed, and I-94 was squished down to 2 lanes in each direction just south of the 3M campus for an eternity because they couldn't be bothered to tend to our needs (a new overpass) as long as the west metro burbs were screaming for more lanes. Mass transit has been similarly sidelined, and the Gold Line has languished in spite of a clear need.

Lake Elmo will go its own way, I guess -it's the poster boy for sprawl. It isn't exactly the hallmark of good governance either. and its denser (relatively!)

