

# Southwest Rail Transit Study

Final Report

*Conducted for*  
Hennepin County Regional Railroad Authority in  
cooperation with the cities of Eden Prairie, Minnetonka,  
Hopkins, St. Louis Park, and Minneapolis.

October 2003

## **Southwest Policy Advisory Committee (PAC)**

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**Mary Tambornino**, *Hennepin County Commissioner*  
**Kevin Johnson**, *City of Minneapolis*  
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**George Watson**, *Three Rivers Park District Commissioner*  
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## **Consultants**

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URS  
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Manual Padron



# 1. INTRODUCTION

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The Hennepin County Regional Railroad Authority (HCRRA), in partnership with the cities of Eden Prairie, Minnetonka, Hopkins, St. Louis Park and Minneapolis conducted a rail transit study for a Southwest Rail Transitway between Eden Prairie and downtown Minneapolis.

The purpose of the Southwest Rail Transit Study was to determine if rail transit should be part of the transportation strategy for the southwest metropolitan area.

Study elements included:

- Continuously informing, involving, and engaging the public in discussions regarding rail transit.
- Defining and evaluating rail transit technology and alignment alternatives.
- Estimating ridership and costs (capital and operating).
- Identifying potential environmental and social impacts.
- Determining if rail transit should continue to be studied as a feasible option for a Southwest Rail Transitway.

## **Study Management**

Two committees, the Southwest Policy Advisory Committee (PAC) and the Southwest Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) provided guidance for the Southwest Rail Transit Study.

### Policy Advisory Committee (PAC)

A Policy Advisory Committee (PAC) composed of elected officials or their representatives from the cities of Eden Prairie, Minnetonka, Hopkins, St. Louis Park, and Minneapolis, Hennepin County, the Metropolitan Council, Metro Transit, Southwest Metro Transit, the Three Rivers Park District, the Twin West Chamber, and the Eden Prairie Chamber was assembled. The Southwest PAC provided policy guidance throughout the study process and developed a recommendation for the HCRRA regarding whether rail transit should continue to be studied as a feasible option for a Southwest Rail Transitway. The Southwest PAC met at key decision points throughout the study process.

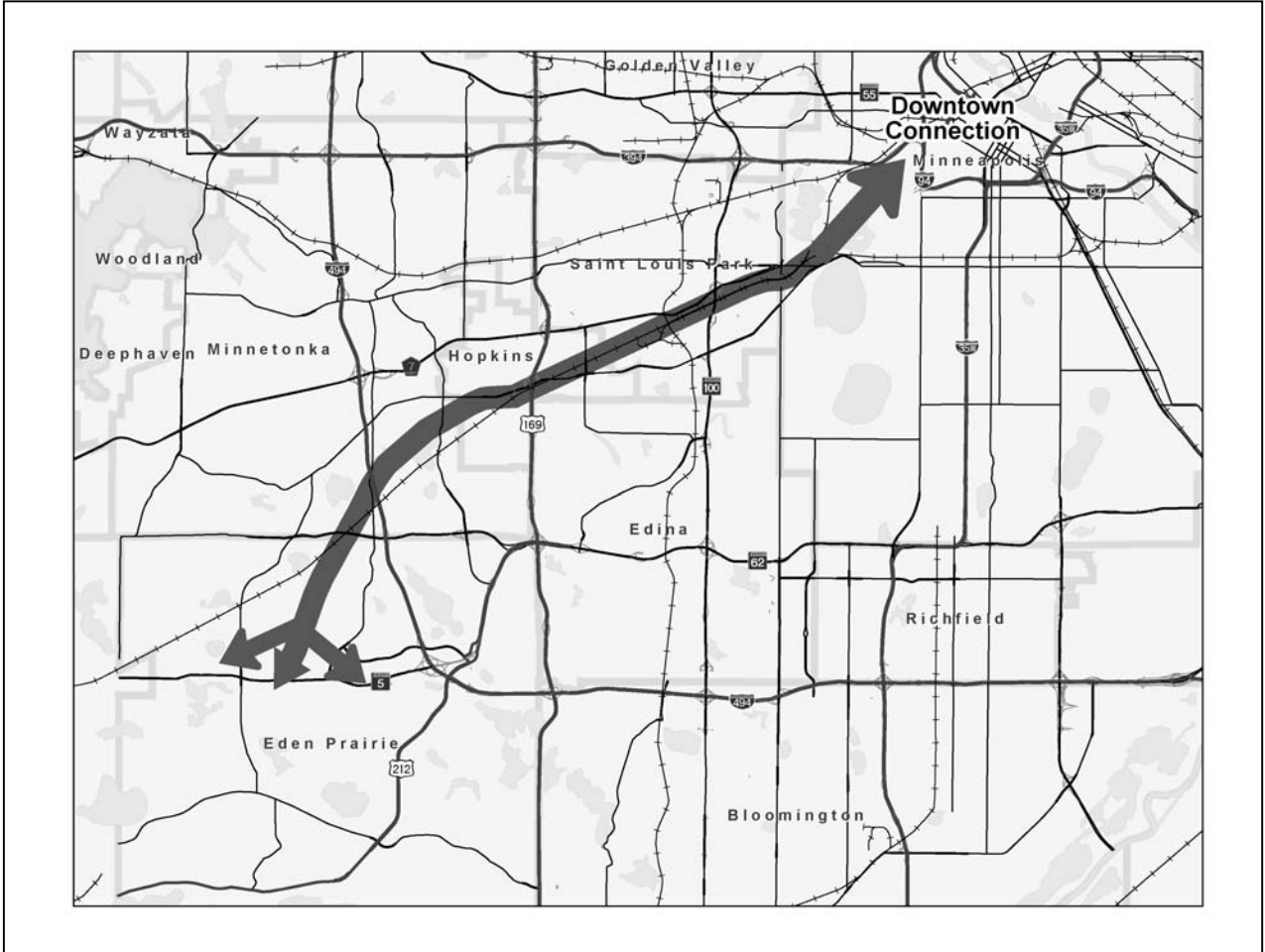
### Technical Advisory Committee (TAC)

A Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) composed of technical staff from the cities of Eden Prairie, Minnetonka, Hopkins, St. Louis Park, and Minneapolis, Hennepin County, the Metropolitan Council, Metro Transit, Southwest Metro Transit, the Three Rivers Park District, the Minnesota Department of Transportation (Mn/DOT), and Twin City Western Railroad was assembled. The Southwest TAC developed a recommendation for Southwest Policy Advisory Committee (PAC) consideration regarding which rail transit alternatives should be considered in future studies. The Southwest TAC met monthly throughout the study process to provide technical guidance and to review the technical work of the consultant.

## Study Area

The study area is defined as the cities of Eden Prairie, Minnetonka, Hopkins, St. Louis Park and Minneapolis.

Figure 1.1 Study Area Map



## History

### Hennepin County Regional Railroad Authority (HCRRA)

The HCRRA was established in 1980 as a political subdivision and local government unit of Minnesota to conduct rail transit planning and to acquire abandoned freight rail corridors in order to preserve them for future transportation uses. The HCRRA consists of the seven members of the Hennepin County Board of Commissioners.

Currently, the HCRRA maintains over 57 miles of former freight rail corridors, which accommodate 37 miles of bicycle and pedestrian trails.

## Southwest Transitway

In recognition of the potential growth in the southwest metro area, a Southwest Transitway has been discussed for this area since the mid-1980s.

The following is a list of the history of planning for a Southwest Transitway:

### **Comprehensive Light Rail Transit (LRT) System Plan, Hennepin County 1988**

In 1988, the HCRRA completed the Comprehensive Light Rail Transit System Plan, which identified the HCRRA's Southwest Corridor from Minneapolis to Hopkins as a future LRT line.

### **29th Street & Southwest Busway Feasibility Study, Hennepin County February 2000**

In 1999, Hennepin County initiated a study to determine the feasibility, defined in terms of ridership forecasts and cost estimates, of constructing and operating a limited-stop, rapid transit busway in the 29th and Southwest (defined as Hopkins to downtown Minneapolis) corridors. The study concluded that based upon ridership forecasts and cost estimates, an exclusive limited-stop busway in the 29th Street and Southwest Corridor is "technically" feasible.

### **Transit 2020 Master Plan, Metropolitan Council, February 2000**

In 2000, the Metropolitan Council published the Transit 2020 Master Plan, the region's long-range plan for improving transit. The Southwest Corridor from Eden Prairie to downtown Minneapolis was identified in Transit 2020 as an exclusive busway for implementation prior to 2010.

### **Twin Cities Exclusive Busway Study, Mn/DOT August 2000**

In 2000, the Commissioner of Transportation directed staff to conduct a study to determine the cost of constructing and operating an exclusive busway system by the Year 2020. This study recommended three exclusive busway corridors for implementation by 2010. Those corridors included the Southwest Corridor, St. Paul Northeast Corridor, and the Minneapolis Northwest Corridor.

### **Legislative Appropriation for Exclusive Busway Studies**

In 2000, the State Legislature appropriated \$6.3 million for the Metropolitan Council to conduct busway studies. The Metropolitan Council decided to divide these funds equally between three busway candidates: the Riverview, Southwest, and Northwest Corridors.

### **Legislative Ban on the Southwest Busway Study**

In 2001, the State Legislature passed a bill banning the Metropolitan Council from studying, planning, designing, constructing and operating a busway in the cities of Minnetonka, Eden Prairie, Chanhassen, and Chaska as well as the Kenilworth and Midtown Corridors in Minneapolis.

### **Transit 2025 Master Plan for Transit**

Late in 2001, the Metropolitan Council changed the designation of the Southwest Corridor from "exclusive busway" to "transitway technology unspecified."

### **Southwest Rail Transit Study**

In early 2002, the HCRRA in partnership with the cities of Eden Prairie, Minnetonka, Hopkins, St. Louis Park and Minneapolis, initiated the current study to revisit earlier plans to develop light rail transit along this corridor. This study represents an initial step in moving towards development of a rail transit option.

### Bicycle and Pedestrian Trails

Currently, 37 miles of bicycle and pedestrian trails are located on land purchased by the Hennepin County Regional Railroad Authority (HCRRA). In 1995 the HCRRA adopted the *HCRRA Land Use Management Plan*, which identified interim bicycle and pedestrian trails as an allowable use on HCRRA property until such a time as the property was required for a transit purpose. While these bicycle and pedestrian trails are identified as "interim" uses, the long-range vision for these corridors are facilities that accommodate both the trails and rail transit.

Within the study area, four trails are located on HCRRA property: the Southwest LRT Trail (north and south), the Kenilworth Trail, the Cedar Lake Trail, and the Midtown Greenway Trail. The Southwest LRT Trail is operated and maintained by the Three Rivers Park District, formerly Suburban Hennepin Parks. The Kenilworth, Cedar Lake, and Midtown Greenway Trails are operated and maintained by the City of Minneapolis.

As stated previously, if a decision is made to locate rail transit along the HCRRA property the intent is for the trail to co-exist with rail transit. The ultimate vision is a user-friendly, multi-modal corridor serving the needs of transit riders while accommodating pedestrians and bicyclists. Through the cities of Eden Prairie, Minnetonka, Hopkins, and St. Louis Park, the HCRRA owns a minimum of 100 feet of right-of-way. In Minneapolis the HCRRA also owns 100 feet of right-of-way with the exception of a small portion of the Kenilworth Corridor where the HCRRA right-of-way narrows to 60 feet. Typically two tracks of LRT require 30 to 35 feet of space and a trail requires 10 to 14 feet of space.



LRT and Trail, Strasbourg, France

According to the *Rails-to-Trails Conservancy*, rail and trails co-exist in over 60 areas in the United States, including a number of areas in Minnesota. Within the study area, rails and trails currently co-exist in the Kenilworth Corridor, the Cedar Lake Corridor, and the Southwest Corridor through Hopkins and St. Louis Park. Until recently rails and trails also co-existed in the Midtown Greenway Corridor. The shared use of these corridors has occurred since the mid-1990s with no incidents related to the operation of freight trains next to the trails.



Trail and Freight Rail, Kenilworth Corridor

### Freight Rail Lines

Three active freight lines, the Canadian Pacific (CP), the Burlington and Northern Santa Fe (BNSF), and the Twin Cities and Western (TCW), currently operate within the study area. These freight rail companies not only provide freight service to customers within the study area and the Twin Cities region, but also to other regions of the country (Seattle, Washington; Aberdeen, South Dakota; and, Kansas City, Missouri). Currently, these freight rail companies have no plans to abandon service through the study area.

## Transit Services

Two transit providers primarily serve the study area cities: Metro Transit and Southwest Metro Transit. Metro Transit provides express, limited-stop and local bus service to the study area cities of Minneapolis, St. Louis Park, Hopkins and Minnetonka. Southwest Metro Transit provides express bus service to downtown Minneapolis from Eden Prairie, Chanhassen and Chaska as well as local circulator service throughout Eden Prairie, Chanhassen and Chaska.

A total of 42 bus routes, 28 express, two limited stop, and 12 local routes, serve the study area. On an average weekday, nearly 45,000 commuters from the study area cities use transit to travel to downtown Minneapolis. Approximately 43,000 study area commuters are carried on Metro Transit buses and 2,000 are carried on Southwest Metro buses. While numerous park-and-rides are located throughout the study area, the largest single park-and-ride facility with over 1,000 spaces is the Southwest Metro Transit Center located in Eden Prairie.

## Roadways

The roadway network in the study area is a comprehensive system of urban interstates, major highways, arterial roadways, collector and local streets. Between 1990 and 2000, traffic growth on the major interstates and highways in the southwest metropolitan area increased by approximately 23 percent. Due to continued population and employment growth, traffic on the southwest metropolitan area major interstates and highways is expected to increase an additional 40% by 2020. This growth in demand for travel in conjunction with limitations on the region's ability to expand existing roadways will place a strain on mobility in the southwest metropolitan area.



## Land Use

Within the five study area cities, a vast mixture of development types and intensities exist. The study area not only encompasses downtown Minneapolis, which remains the largest traffic generator in the region, but also quickly growing suburban communities. Downtown Minneapolis remains the largest traffic generator in the region with over 140,000 jobs, the HHH Metrodome, the Target Center, the Convention Center, the Guthrie Theater, the Walker Art Center, and Orchestra Hall. The remaining study area cities have also grown quickly in recent years developing employment concentrations in area such as downtown Hopkins, Opus, Golden Triangle.