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'Intervention' proposed in the Legislature aims to reset culture of transit ridership

Testifiers at the Capitol spoke about drug use, crime and other rampant issues facing the light rail system.

CHRISTINE SCHUSTER • 2 HOURS AGO

Photo by Tony Webster via Flickr.

Travelers and tourists arriving at the [Minneapolis-St. Paul](#) International Airport often head straight to the information desk to ask how they can ride public transit.

"They might ride it one way, but they don't ride it back because they're afraid," Mitch Kilian, vice president of governmental affairs for the Metropolitan Airports Commission, told lawmakers this week.

Kilian and others testifying before the House Transportation Finance and Policy Committee on Thursday said problems facing the light rail system before the pandemic, such as substance use and crime, have risen dramatically since.

Kilian said passengers openly smoking crack pipes next to other passengers is a "very regular occurrence."

A new [proposed bill](#) sets out to "reset" the culture of transit ridership through a three-month, intensive intervention program, said bill sponsor Rep. Brad Tabke, DFL-[Shakopee](#).

According to Tabke, the proposal is the first step in a two-step plan designed to bring enhanced social services to the system and enforce a "code of conduct" for transit riders.

"The transit system is a magnet for the issues we're handling in society right now," Tabke said, adding an "ambassador" program will come forward in a separate bill.

Metropolitan Council Chair Charlie Zelle told lawmakers problems on transit have reached an "unacceptable level", especially since the pandemic.

While measures such as real-time cameras and "defensive" station designs have helped, Zelle said they haven't been enough.

Just this week, two men were arrested and charged in connection with the brutal beating of a transgender woman at the Lake Street Station.

Zelle said the Met Council has struggled to hire enough "customer service officers," which are tasked with monitoring behavior. There's currently 107 officers in active, full-time employment while the budget calls for 171.

While a significant law enforcement presence is helpful, "we can't police our way to safety," he added. "We need much more than that."

Aiden Kilgannan, who has Down syndrome, said he was riding the Blue Line to work on Feb. 3 when a woman wearing only a towel hit him with a shoe, took his bag and spit on his face twice.

After riding transit to work for over five years, he no longer feels safe doing so.

"I need it to be safe," he told lawmakers. "The Blue Line needs to be safer."

The bill heard Thursday is expected to pass out of the Transportation Finance and Policy Committee early next week.