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## **THE BLUE LINE EXTENSION'S NORTH MINNEAPOLIS MOBILITY MYTH**

When the proposed Blue Line Extension light rail line between Brooklyn Park and downtown Minneapolis was relocated from a rail freight corridor to a much slower pathway over city street medians, a key objective was to improve the mobility of North Minneapolis stakeholders through enhanced transit accessibility. Trips from the northwest suburbs to downtown would take longer but more transit-dependent Northside riders would have walk-up access to the region's light rail network and, presumably, to more efficient travel to and through downtown Minneapolis.

While that outcome may look and feel good, don't bet much on it. That's because the Blue Line Extension (BLE) really can't improve overall Northside mobility because the bus service already in place is so good. The current, 14 route-mile, north-to-south bus network along Lyndale, Fremont and Penn Avenues puts over 90% of the Northside's 60,000 residents west of I-94 within a quarter mile of a punctual, frequent, 16-mph single seat ride to, toward and through downtown Minneapolis.

The 16-mph BLE, in sharp contrast, will run just 2.5 miles northwest-to-southeast into downtown via West Broadway and Washington Avenues, with fewer than 15% of Northside residents within a quarter mile of its more widely spaced stations. These potential riders, moreover, will be just as close to a north-to-south bus route that will reach downtown two to four minutes faster from where it crosses West Broadway than the circuitous Blue Line Extension.

As such, expect most riders to avoid the train and continue riding buses. Only those travelling locally along Broadway, riding through downtown, or going nowhere in particular – collectively just 20 percent of potential ridership - will use the slower BLE, causing North Minneapolis BLE ridership to fall far below expectations.

Met Council can ill afford a ridership (and credibility) gap wherein just 200 weekday riders board the BLE at Penn Avenue when 800 were predicted. But its only real remedy - forcing bus riders into unwanted and time-consuming light rail transfers, mode substitutions and route detours – would actually sacrifice overall Northside mobility for the sake of contrived BLE boarding counts.

Met Council is no stranger to this ploy. To pad its 40,000 weekday Green Line boarding count, it rerouted its Dale Street buses away from downtown St. Paul in 2014, forcing a couple hundred weekday riders into Green Line transfers that turned 20-minute commutes into 30-minute slogs. With far more at stake in North Minneapolis, it will be an easy call to funnel well over 1,000 riders from all over the Northside into BLE transfers at Penn and James Avenue stations to meet an underwhelming 13,000 route-wide goal.

This need not happen. Met Council, with Hennepin County's support, should instead do right by the greater Northside and replace the BLE with a safer and far less disruptive arterial Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) service running at the same speed over the same West Broadway and Bottineau Boulevard streetscapes - and then leave the Northside's existing north-to-south bus service alone.

That would preserve those seamless single-seat downtown bus rides via Lyndale, Penn and Fremont Avenues and afford walk-up riders at key West Broadway intersections the unrivaled mobility of downtown departures every 5 minutes via alternating and equally fast BRT routes. And it would keep West Broadway businesses, institutions and residences where they are.

The "Broadway BRT" would, in essence, be a practical \$300 million investment that makes all riders better off than they are today and most better off than riding the slow and meandering BLE. It would replace a shaky \$3 billion light rail outlay where a relative few suburban and North Loop travelers get to the airport ten minutes faster while many more Northside riders, forced to transfer, wait in the snow at Penn Avenue 10-minutes longer. How equitable is that?

Met Council and its Hennepin County allies have refused to even consider, much less evaluate, bus-based alternatives to light rail. Fortunately, concerned state lawmakers have intervened and insisted on just such an evaluation. With diligence and bipartisan support, their efforts will expose the full range of BLE deficiencies so that this misguided rail transit application can be stopped in its tracks. There already is, after all, a better way to serve the Northside.

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