



NORTHSTAR NEWS



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Construction of light-rail line is on schedule

Train cars are on order, rails have been delivered and crews are tunneling beneath the airport.

By: Laurie Blake; Staff Writer

On a snowy evening in late November, 20 people stood on a street corner in south Minneapolis to listen to the sounds of light rail.

Transit officials rang a bell and blew a horn matching the tone and volume of the warning signals residents will hear when service begins on the Hiawatha Line between downtown Minneapolis and the Mall of America.

It was just a demonstration _ with the bell held aloft on a pole and the horn mounted on a truck _ but the train sounds in the night air sent a clear

signal that the metro area's first light-rail line is becoming a reality.

Underway for a year, construction of the line itself (not including related work such as design) is about 19 percent complete. Train cars have been ordered, rails have been delivered and the path of the tracks is visible from Nicollet Mall to Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport. Officials report that the project is on schedule and within budget, with initial service between downtown Minneapolis and Fort Snelling set to begin in 2003.

"It's been a good year. We should get a little gold star or a check or something," said Ted Mondale, chairman of the Metropolitan

Council, which will operate the line.

When construction began early this year, there were two big worries: whether there would be physical obstacles or costly surprises in digging a tunnel to take the line under the airport and whether Xcel Energy Co. would throw the

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project off schedule by refusing to move its underground utilities out of the line's path along 5th Street in downtown Minneapolis.

As the year ends, "The utility work is almost done downtown, and we are over 1,000 feet into the tunnel and there are no problems," Mondale said.

But challenges remain:

- Unexpected expenses consumed more than half of the project's contingency budget in the first year of construction. Officials say that most of a project's surprises are expected in the first year, so unbudgeted expenses should level off. But they are watching spending carefully.

- In March, Xcel will begin its court battle to have the state pay for the millions spent on the utility work. If the state is forced to pay, the line probably would have to be shortened, Mondale said.

- A detailed accounting of project expenses will be issued by the legislative auditor in March. The report is expected to answer critics' questions about whether there are hidden costs not reflected in the project's \$ 675 million price.

- And legislators have yet to decide how to pay rail operating costs. In 2004 dollars, the

service is expected to cost \$ 16 million a year, with one-third paid by fare revenues. Here's a look at where various aspects of the project stand.

Finances

Mark Fuhrmann, the project's chief of staff, said that the effort is in good financial shape but that close monitoring of expenses is required.

"Every day the Hiawatha project [staff] manages very closely all of our contracts and contractors. It's a constant, constant fiscal vigilance that we have to exert to make sure that we are spending dollars in the most productive way to build this project," he said.

The first year of construction used \$ 14 million of the \$ 24 million contingency fund. But about \$ 5 million will be added to the fund from 2001 savings that resulted largely from legislative action to exempt the purchase of the light-rail cars from the state's sales tax, Fuhrmann said.

Mondale said that the biggest financial unknown for 2002 is who will pay Xcel's utility relocation costs.

Xcel Vice President Kent Larson said crews have been working around the clock since August to finish the relocation by the February 2002 deadline. Work has gone well



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but has presented more challenges than anticipated, and in the end it is expected to cost what Xcel had estimated: between \$ 18 million and \$ 20 million, he said.

Design

The line is being constructed under a fast-track design-build contract that allowed work to begin on some segments before the entire design was finished.

The design is about 70 percent finished. Final design remains for the two ends of the line _ between the airport and the Mall of America and between 1st Avenue N. and Nicollet Mall in downtown Minneapolis _ and is scheduled to be done by March or April.

Train cars

The Met Council contracted in January 2001 with Canadian manufacturer Bombardier to build rail cars for the Hiawatha Line. The project's budget includes \$ 80 million to pay for as many as 26 vehicles, and 19 have been ordered so far, said John Byrd, Metro Transit's assistant general manager for rail operations.

Metro Transit staff members have made quality inspections at the factories where components are being manufactured for the cars, Byrd said. The doors are being made in Vienna, the under-body trucks in France, the propulsion system in Japan and the train couplers in North Carolina.

Those parts will be shipped to Mexico, where Bombardier will make the cars. But the cars ultimately will be shipped to Vermont for final assembly, Byrd said.

The first vehicle is scheduled to arrive in January 2003 and will be tested back and forth on a Hiawatha test track for more than 1,000 miles to check for major component failure. If it performs as expected, the final order for the other cars will be placed in March 2003, he said.

The tunnel

Tunneling has resulted in cost overruns on some other projects around the country, so officials have some worry that the tunnel to carry the rail line under the airport could encounter difficulties.

So far, the boring has progressed more than 1,000 feet _ roughly 65 feet a day _ toward a March breakthrough date, said Patrick Mosites, project manager for the Metropolitan Airports Commission. The tunnel will have two parallel shafts and once one side is finished, digging will start on the second side. The boring has gone smoothly but an underground valley where the machine could encounter boulders will not be reached until late January, Mosites said.

Auditor's report

Republican legislators who are critical of the project's costs were instrumental in



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requiring the legislative auditor to investigate.

The first of two reports from the auditor will be due in March; the second will come in 2003.

Claudia Gudvangen, deputy legislative auditor, said her staff will look at administrative costs related to early planning and right-of-way purchases, among other things, to identify all costs associated with the project.

State Rep. Phil Krinkie, a Shoreview Republican who's been a project critic and watchdog, said the report will get to the heart of his concern, which is: "What in the world is this thing going to cost when we get done?"

Operating costs

Officials have made repeated assurances that money will not be drained from Metro Transit bus service to pay light-rail operating costs, but legislators have yet to identify a source of rail operating funds.

"When they go to start up things, I think the shock is going to be how much it costs to operate the system every year," Krinkie said. Mondale said the legislative discussion about how to pay for operating costs is likely to occur in 2003.

In 2004, 2005 and 2006, the Met Council will be able to tap \$ 3 million to \$ 4 million a year in federal air-quality and congestion-mitigation grants, he said. But the state will have to identify a permanent source of money.

"I would presume that the Legislature, having approved \$ 100 million for their share of this project, is expecting to pay for part of the

operations as well," he said. "I can't imagine someone will stand up and say, 'We will build it, but we won't run it.'"

Bells, horns

When the line starts service, warning horns and bells may sound as often as every three minutes during rush hours as trains going opposite directions pass through intersections.

Barbara Gudmundson, who lives on 28th Avenue in south Minneapolis, heard one of the bell demonstrations from her home and said, "I thought it was soft and not intrusive at all."

Gudmundson has good memories of taking Chicago trains as a young woman and predicts the Hiawatha Line will be well-received.

"We are going to get used to it and really treasure it," she said. "I think it's just a matter of our metropolitan area growing up."

Laurie Blake is at lblake@startribune.com.

Editor's Notes

By Lauren Maiden

Anyone is welcome to submit articles for the Northstar News. If you wish to submit an article please, PLEASE follow the guidelines below as they help keep down the cost of publication.

Thanks,

Lauren Maiden-Editor

Guidelines for Submission in the
Northstar News

1. Articles must be postmarked/time-stamped by the **first of the month**, while it may not be used in that exact month, rest assured your



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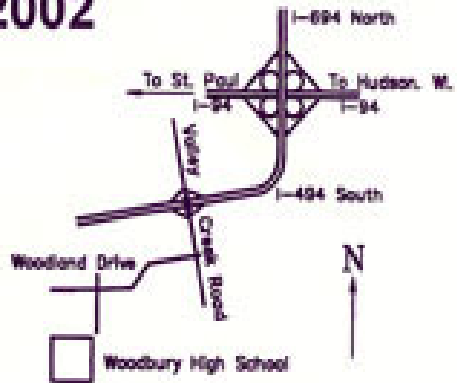
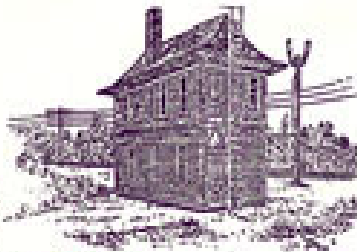
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2. Articles need to be under 2000 words- any more and it will come back for editing.
3. You can submit articles, etc to:

Lauren Maiden

UWRF Crabtree 209
850 E Cascade Ave
River Falls, WI 54022

LAUREN.K.MAIDEN@UWRF.EDU

4. If you would like to make comments, suggestions about what you would like to see in the newsletter, please contact either the Editor, or Dan Meyer.

- 5 If you have not received your copy of the Northstar News or you have an address change, please contact Dan Meyer.



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The January Northstar Chapter, NRHS Meeting is Saturday, January 19 @ 7:00 PM @ the James J. Hill House.



Hill House c. 1906

We may arrive promptly at 6:00 pm (please, not before). There will be tours of the house at 6 and 6:30.

The business meeting will begin promptly @ 7:00. We have to leave by 9:15. Our members are requested to donate \$5.00 each to help defray the \$400 cost. We were at the Hill house exactly ten years ago, when the cost was \$182.

Mr. Richard Prosser will give the program. Some, not all will be the usual Milwaukee Road. He has 40 or so slides of M & St. Louis depots. There will be a mixture of the other local railroads, too.

Mr. Tom Neadle will be playing the organ before our meeting as an additional perk. They will be providing the projector and the screen as part of our cost. We will be allowed to set up our beverages as well.

(Photos courtesy of the Minnesota Historical Society @ www.mhs.org/places/sites/jjhh/index.html.)



James J. Hill c. 1910

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| Location: | James J. Hill House |
| Address: | 240 Summit Ave, St. Paul, MN 55102 |
| Arrival: | 6:00 pm, please no earlier |
| Tours: | 6:00 & 6:30 Tours of House |
| Meeting: | 7:00 pm, Tom Neadle playing the organ prior to start |
| Program: | Dick Prosser, Mixture of RR Slides |
| Closing time: | 9:15 pm, must depart |
| Amount: | \$5.00 donation, to help cost \$400 |

 MINNESOTA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

*Meetings are usually the third Saturday of the month
in the St. Paul Fire Department Training Center.*

*NEXT MEETING: February 16, 2002 @ the St. Paul Fire Department Training Center-
Program TBA in the February Northstar News*



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the NEW ADDRESS IS:

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