Issue 57 #2s Northstar Railway Historical Society Newsletter Special Edition February 2026

NRHS

Publishers of the Minnesota Rail Calendar

# Northstar News Special Edition

## A Look at 16 years of Northstar Commuter service

## *Next Meeting Saturday February 14th 2026 Roseville Lutheran Church*

*L: 2010 Aug 01 RR 021 WB NS Commuter Osborne Rd -R Tubbesing Photo*

*R: Northstar at Big Lake after a chapter trip in June 2010 –R Tubbesing Photo*

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*Last Northstar regular run NB St Anthony Blvd Bridge Jan 2 2026 – Dawn Holmberg*

*Last Northstar regular run NB at Elk River Jan 2 2026 –Dawn Holmberg*

## Special Edition

A look at the history and photos of the Northstar Commuter line. Noting the last run on Jan 4th 2026


After 16 years of service, Sadly this train will not run anymore. The locomotives and passenger cars have been spoken for. Amtrak will take some of passenger cars and the Dallas—Fort Worth Trinity Express will be receiving locomotives and cars. The Maintenance Facility in Big Lake is being transferred to MNDOT for possible sale and Amtrak has shown an interested in it. BNSF has a request that the stations and platforms for most of the stations be removed. A sad ending indeed!

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The Northstar Commuter Rail was a 40.1-mile passenger rail line in Minnesota that operated from 2009 until its permanent retirement on **January 4, 2026**. It connected downtown Minneapolis to Big Lake, primarily serving the northwest suburbs during peak commuting hours

**Chronological History**

**1997 – Planning Phase:** The Northstar Corridor Development Authority (NCDA) was formed to explore rail service between Minneapolis and St. Cloud.

**2002 – Funding & Scope Changes:** The Federal Transit Administration declined full funding for the original 80-mile route due to ridership concerns. Plans were scaled back to a 40-mile "Minimum Operable Segment" terminating at Big Lake.

**2005 – Construction:** Work began on stations in Minneapolis, Fridley, Coon Rapids, Anoka, Elk River, and Big Lake.

**2009 – Opening:** Passenger service officially launched on **November 16, 2009**.

**2012 – Expansion:** The Ramsey station opened as an infill station on November 14, 2012.

**2017 – Peak Ridership:** The line reached its highest usage with approximately 794,000 annual boardings.

**2020 – Pandemic Decline:** Ridership dropped by nearly 98% during the COVID-19 pandemic, falling to just 50,000 annual riders by 2021.

**2025 – Termination Decision:** Due to unsustainable subsidies (reaching over $100 per rider) and low recovery, officials announced the line's closure in favor of more flexible bus service.

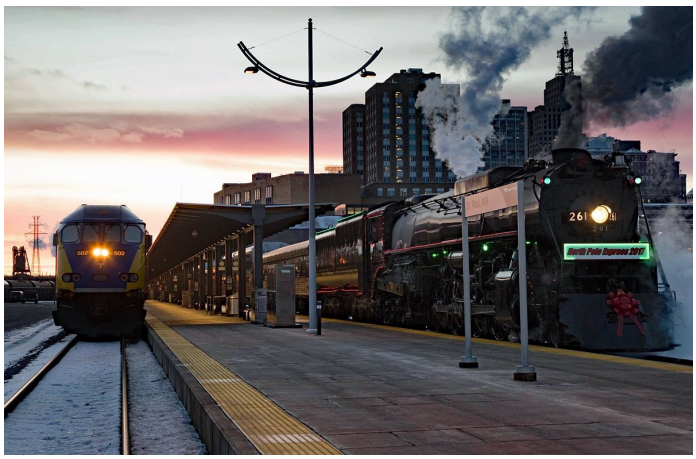
**2026 – Final Service:** The last trains ran on **January 4, 2026**, coinciding with a final Minnesota Vikings home game.

**Operational Details**

**Infrastructure:** The trains operated on existing BNSF Railway freight tracks through a shared-use agreement.

**Rolling Stock:** The fleet consisted of MotivePower MP36PH-3C locomotives and Bombardier BiLevel coaches.

**Replacement:** On **January 5, 2026**, the Northstar Link and other expanded bus routes (such as Route 888) replaced the rail service to provide more frequent all-day travel options.



#261 North Pole Express and a Northstar Commuter visit to SPUD Dec 2017 -Jeff Terry


April 20 2013 NB Northstar Commuter at Harrison St Mpls –R Tubbesing

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***What factors contributed to the Northstar Line's low ridership and financial challenges?***

The Northstar Line's low ridership and financial challenges were due to a combination of foundational issues with its design and significant external shocks, primarily the **COVID-19 pandemic**. The line's financial model relied heavily on taxpayer subsidies because fare revenue covered less than 3% of costs in its later years.

Key factors that contributed to these problems include:

**Limited Service and Scope:** The line was a 40-mile "Minimum Operable Segment," falling short of the original plan to reach St. Cloud, a major population center. The limited frequency of trains, with only a few round trips during weekday peak hours, made it impractical for many potential riders who needed more flexible travel options. Weekend and special event services were also cut back in its later years. (special trains for Twins and Vikings games)

**Design as a Pure Commuter Line:** Northstar was designed specifically for a standard 9-to-5, suburb-to-downtown commute. This model proved inflexible when work patterns shifted, especially with the rise of remote work during the pandemic.

**Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic:** The pandemic caused a dramatic drop in ridership of nearly 98%. The shift to remote and hybrid work meant the specific type of travel the line was built to serve largely disappeared, and ridership never recovered to pre-pandemic levels.

**Competition and Alternatives:** When the line launched, it faced competition from improved parallel Highway 10 and lower downtown Minneapolis parking costs, which were more attractive options for some commuters. The eventual replacement by bus service, offering nearly ten times as many weekly trips at a fraction of the cost, further highlighted the rail line's operational inefficiencies.

**High Operating Subsidies:** The combination of low ridership and high operating and maintenance costs resulted in an unsustainably high public subsidy per passenger, reaching over $100 per ride in later years, compared to around $16 for bus service. This made continuing the service difficult to justify financially.

2010 Sept NB Northstar 10 car from a Minnesota Twins game train at the Coon Rapids Station –R Tubbesing


Minnesota Rail Calendar Photo in Fall of 2018 by Roger Libra

***What were Northstar's projected ridership and costs?***

The Northstar Commuter Rail's history was characterized by ridership and financial performance that consistently fell short of original goals, eventually leading to its closure in **January 2026**.

**Ridership Projections vs. Actual Performance**

**Initial Projections (2009–2010):** Planners originally projected **897,000 annual riders** for the first full year of service (2010). Actual ridership in 2010 was **715,000**, missing the target by roughly 20%.

**Peak Usage (2017–2019):** Ridership reached its highest levels during this period, with approximately **794,000 annual boardings** and an average of **2,660 to 2,814 weekday rides**.

**Long-Term Projections (Pre-Pandemic):** Before the COVID-19 pandemic, a 2009 study projected the line would carry **5,590 daily riders by 2025** and 6,200 by 2030.

**Final Years (2024–2025):** Following the pandemic, ridership never recovered. In 2024, the line averaged only **430 weekday rides**. By its final year of operation in 2025, annual ridership was approximately **113,400**, a fraction of its early goals.

**Capital and Operating Costs**

**Construction Costs:** The initial 40-mile segment cost approximately **$317 million to $320 million** to build.

**Operating Budget:** The annual cost to operate the service was roughly **$11 million to $12 million** in its final years. In 2025, the operating budget was estimated at **$16 million** when including capital investments.

**Farebox Recovery:** Ticket revenue was historically low and declined severely after 2020. In 2023, the line collected just **$323,589 in fares**, covering less than **3% of operating costs**. **Per-Rider Subsidies**

The financial strain of the line was most evident in the taxpayer subsidy required for each boarding:

**Pre-Pandemic (2019):** Approximately **$19 per passenger**.

**Post-Pandemic (2021–2025):** The subsidy skyrocketed as ridership plummeted, reaching **$116.60 in 2023** and over **$233 per round-trip rider** by the time of its closure announcement in 2025.

**Comparison:** By contrast, the commuter bus service that replaced Northstar in **January 2026** required a subsidy of only **$16.07 per ride**.

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***What other options were considered besides buses to replace Northstar?***

Besides enhanced bus service (like Bus Rapid Transit or express buses), other options considered to replace or supplement the Northstar Commuter Rail included various rail scenarios (like extending existing lines or new Amtrak routes) and Transportation Systems Management (TSM) improvements, but ultimately, expanded bus service emerged as the primary replacement after Light Rail and Bus Rapid Transit were screened out for cost-effectiveness.

**Rail-Based Alternatives**

**Commuter Rail (Northstar) with Extensions:** Keeping the Northstar line but extending it further north to St. Cloud and potentially beyond to Fargo/Moorhead.

**New Intercity Rail:** Creating new passenger rail services between St. Paul, Fargo/Moorhead, or connecting to other regions like Sioux Falls/Omaha.

**Amtrak Integration:** Adding more Amtrak stops or utilizing existing Amtrak lines (like the Empire Builder) for more convenient suburban access, though this faced capacity and scheduling issues.

**Bus & Road-Based Options**

**Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) & Express Bus:** Expanding bus service with dedicated lanes (BRT) or faster express routes, which became the favored replacement after more expensive rail options were dropped.

**Transportation Systems Management (TSM):** A mix of improved existing bus services, intelligent transportation systems (ITS), and better pedestrian/bicycle facilities.

**Why Buses Won (for Replacement)**

**Cost-Effectiveness:** Light Rail and BRT were often screened out due to high costs compared to the investment in expanded bus routes.

**Flexibility:** Buses can better adapt to changing travel patterns and can be more cost-efficient for lower-demand corridors.

Ultimately, the Metropolitan Council decided to replace the Northstar rail service with improved bus routes (like Route 766) due to ongoing low ridership and high operating costs, aiming for a more cost-effective solution.

Northstar SB to a Vikings Game at Anoka Nov 16 2018 –Dawn Holmberg

NB Northstar commuter Univ Jct July 2nd 2011 –R Tubbesing

***What are the criteria for successful implementation of a commuter rail line?***

The successful implementation of a commuter rail line depends on a blend of strategic planning, robust infrastructure, community engagement, and a service model that meets market needs.

Key criteria for success include:

**Planning and Strategy**

**Market Analysis:** Understanding current and future travel patterns, population density, and employment hubs is crucial to ensure the service attracts enough ridership beyond just traditional peak commuters.

**Strategic Planning:** Developing a comprehensive regional strategic plan and governance strategy that aligns the new rail service with broader mobility goals.

**Integrated Urban Planning:** Coordinating rail planning with local land-use policies to encourage transit-oriented development (TOD) around stations, which helps drive ridership and creates new revenue streams.

**Funding and Governance**

**Secure, Consistent Funding:** Identifying diverse and long-term funding sources, such as government grants, private investments, and local contributions, is essential to avoid fiscal instability.

**Effective Governance:** Establishing clear governance models and strong coordination among all affected transportation authorities, local jurisdictions, and stakeholders (including freight operators on shared lines) to streamline decision-making and operations.

**Infrastructure and Operations**

**Reliable Infrastructure:** Ensuring high-quality, resilient infrastructure with sufficient capacity, dedicated rights-of-way where possible, and modern signaling systems for safety and on-time performance.

**All-Day, Bi-directional Service:** Offering frequent, regular service throughout the day and on weekends, rather than solely focusing on peak-hour commutes, attracts a wider market of riders.

**Seamless Integration:** Designing stations and services that integrate well with other transportation modes (buses, subways, walking, biking), including fare-sharing agreements and clear passenger information, makes the system easier to use.

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**Operational Efficiency:** Implementing measures to increase cost efficiency, such as better equipment and crew utilization and simplified fare collection methods (e.g., off-board fare collection), helps manage operating costs.

**Community and Customer Focus**

**Public Engagement:** Engaging early and often with the community, businesses, and environmental groups to build trust, address concerns, and ensure the service meets local needs.

**Customer Experience:** Providing a comfortable, safe, and reliable service with amenities like Wi-Fi, good on-time performance, and intuitive passenger information systems.

***What are the criteria for successful implementation of a commuter rail line?***

Successful implementation of a commuter rail line in 2026 depends on integrating robust operational standards with strategic regional planning and financial sustainability.

**1. Operational Excellence and Service Model**

**Regional Rail Transition:** Modern systems are shifting from peak-only "9-to-5" service to a regional rail model featuring **all-day, bi-directional service** with consistent hourly or half-hourly schedules.

**Reliability and Maintenance:** Maintaining a "state of good repair" through timely infrastructure maintenance (e.g., track rehabilitation and modernizing power systems) directly correlates with high customer satisfaction and ridership growth.

**Staffing and Training:** Success in 2026 is heavily driven by aggressive operator hiring and training to ensure shorter headways and fewer dropped trips.

**Modern Rolling Stock:** Implementation of newer, often electrified, trainsets (e.g., Amtrak Airo) improves passenger experience through faster Wi-Fi, better seating, and reduced emissions.

**2. Strategic Station and Land Use Planning**

**Transit-Oriented Development (TOD):** Developing land immediately surrounding stations encourages ridership by creating walkable residential and commercial hubs.

**Siting and Accessibility:** Stations must be centrally located and accessible via multiple modes (walking, biking, and transit). 2026 standards prioritize **ADA-compliant design**, such as the early-phase planning of elevators to optimize passenger flow.

**Operational Compatibility:** Planning must account for shared use with freight traffic, ensuring sufficient track capacity, signal sightlines, and crossovers to manage two-way operations without delays.

**3. Governance and Financial Sustainability**

**Stable Funding Models:** Securing long-term, consistent funding sources—such as five-year Capital Investment Plans (CIP) or public-private partnerships—is essential for sustained operations.

**Regional Governance:** Effective implementation requires a unified governance strategy or "Joint Powers Agency" to coordinate between state agencies, local municipalities, and transit providers.

**Strategic Fare Integration:** Successful lines implement fare-sharing agreements with other agencies and offer flexible pricing (e.g., five-day flex passes or weekend promotions) to attract non-traditional commuters.


2013 Aug 20 Northstar NB Univ Jct –R Tubbesing


Northstar at Elk River Apr 24 2019 -Ken Matson

**4. Community and Environmental Integration**

**Decarbonization Goals:** 2026 plans increasingly prioritize the transition to **electric or zero-emission fleets** to meet regional environmental targets.

**Community Partnership:** Collaboration with local jurisdictions ensures the rail system is compatible with existing road networks and addresses community concerns like noise and grade crossing safety.

Below are photos from the many trips our chapter has ridden the Northstar over the last 16 years. Photos are from Dawn Holmberg and Richard Tubbesing unless otherwise specified. Thanks to John Goodman for organizing these trips.


*2015 Jul 23 Bob Ball*

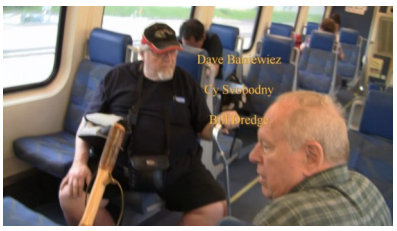
*Dawn Holmberg 2011 Mar 26 NS Commuter at Big lake*


*2015 June 08 Group Shot at Big Lake –Dawn Holmberg*

*From Video: L to R: 1. 2010 Aug 14 Inside coach 2. 2010 Aug 14 the Late and former president Marty Swan 3. 2010 Mar 21 Russ Isbrandt*




*Above Three from video: From Mar 26 2011*




*L to R: All Photos from June 21 2014 1.Cy Svobodny, Bill Dredge 2.The late Dee Smith Lundeen 3.Joe Fishbein, Russ Isbrandt, Robert Thurn 4.Dawn Holmberg at Target Field station –R Tubbesing from video*

*L to R Dec 17th 2025 1. Jack Barbier, Jack and Janet Bierbaum 2. Bill Dredge, John Chute, Dan Meyer, Dick Tubbesing , and Jack Barbier 3. Glenn Holmberg, Wayne Torseth and Gary Rumler –Dawn Holmberg*

**Stations On the Route: (views of the Train and from the cab car on the Train –from video by R Tubbesing)**


L to R: 1.Target Field Minneapolis 2010 Aug 14 2. Crossing the Mississippi River Aug 14 2010 3. BNSF WB Train at the Fridley Station June 21 2014



L to R: 1. Coon Rapids Station Aug 14 2010 2. Anoka Station Aug 14 2010 3. Elk River Station Aug 14 2010

*Arrives at Big Lake Station June 15 2010*

*Big Lake Maint Facility and the 'Bomb Pop' Aug 14 2010*

*Train Arrives Elk River Jung 16 2010*

*Train crosses the Crow River Anoka MN June 16 2010*


*Train at Coon Rapids Station June 16 2010*

*Train at Fridley Station June 16 2010*

*L & R: 2018 May 7th Northstar North Bound at University Junction –R Tubbesing*

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L: *2013 Apr 13 1st Ave Minneapolis about to enter Target field -Roger Libra*
*R: 2010 Sept Northstar NB 10 car Twins Game Special at Coon Raids station*

## Last Run of the Northstar Jan 4 2026 –Special Run for the Vikings Football Game Photos from Video by Dan Meyer and R Tubbesing

*L to R: 1. Northstar crosses the Mississippi River after departing Target Field in Minneapolis. 2. Northstar exchanges whistles as it passes a BNSF WB Freight at Osborne Road in Fridley Minnesota. 3. The day draws to a close as the Northstar Trian approaches the Big Lake Station. A Special thanks to Dan Meyer and Dawn Holmberg for chasing this last run of the Northstar.*

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