Executive Summary

The Southwest Rail Transit Study was a joint effort of the Hennepin County Regional Railroad Authority (HCRRA) and the cities of Eden Prairie, Minnetonka, Hopkins, St. Louis Park, and Minneapolis. The purpose of the Study was to determine if rail transit is a feasible part of the overall transportation solution for the southwestern metro area. In July 2003, the Study concluded with a recommendation to continue further study of a Southwest light rail transitway (LRT).

THE PROBLEM FACING THE REGION

GROWTH

According to the US Census, the Twin Cities region added 430,000 new residents and 290,000 new jobs between 1990 and 2000, which equates to a 17% increase in population and a 23% increase in jobs. During this same period, study area cities added 34,000 new residents and 37,000 new jobs.

By 2030, this region will add 635,000 people, 320,000 households and 312,000 jobs. Study area cities will add 63,000 residents and 79,000 jobs and will then account for 17% of all residents and 25% of all regional employment.

CONGESTION

At the same time that the region is growing, congestion is projected to worsen at a faster rate than in the past due to increases in the amount of travel per person. Daily Vehicle Miles Traveled (VMT) is expected to increase faster (+38%) than population growth (+28%) over the next 25 years.

The Texas Transportation Institute found that the Twin Cities region area is tied with Atlanta in the growth of congestion. Currently, 65% of freeway travel in the Twin Cities region occurs under congested conditions.

THE CHALLENGE

This region must accommodate the projected growth while maintaining a competitive business environment and improving the region's quality of life.

According to Mn/DOT, due to financial, physical, environmental and social constraints, roadway expansion to solve congestion is severely limited. Plans developed by Mn/DOT and the Metropolitan Council to manage the region's transportation system include both roadway and transit improvements. A Southwest Transitway was included along with improvements to area roadways such as Interstate 494 and Highways 100, 169, 62, and 212 in those regional transportation plans.

SOUTHWEST TRANSITWAY GOALS

- Improve mobility.
- Provide a reliable/competitive travel choice.
- Serve population and employment concentrations.
- Move passengers efficiently and effectively.
- Reasonable cost.
- Enhance the environment.
- Enhance the Study area and region's quality of life.
- Promote economic development and redevelopment.

STUDY PROCESS

The Study process included:

- Soliciting input from the public, elected officials and agencies.
- Evaluating rail transit technologies.
- Evaluating rail transit routes.
- Identifying potential social, economic and environmental impacts.
- Estimating ridership and costs

A Policy Advisory Committee (PAC) and a Technical Advisory Committee (TAC) guided the Study. The TAC prepared a technical recommendation for consideration by the PAC. The PAC then developed a recommendation for consideration by the Hennepin County Regional Railroad Authority (HCRRA).

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

A key component of the Southwest Rail Transit Study was engaging and involving the general public and other key interest groups. The following involvement techniques were employed during the study process:

- 13 community meetings were held to provide information and receive feedback.
- Over 25 special meetings with neighborhood, community, and business groups were held.
- Eight news releases were produced, resulting in more than 50 articles in local newspapers.
- Five newsletters were mailed to over 500 interested persons.
- A web site was maintained with Study reports and meeting information.

RESIDENT SURVEY

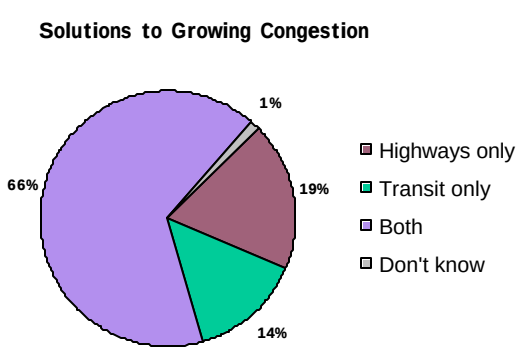
In late 2002, the Hennepin County Regional Railroad Authority (HCRRA) hired an independent market research firm, CJ Olson Research, Inc., to conduct a survey of study area residents to gauge their perspectives on traffic congestion, transportation solutions, and light rail transit. Phone interviews were conducted with 650 randomly selected heads of households, which resulted in statistically reliable findings with a margin of error of +/- 3.8%.

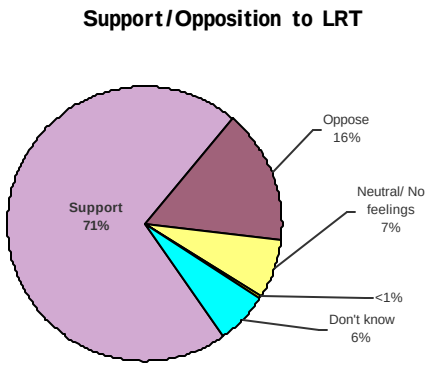
Solutions to Growing Congestion

When asked what they thought was the best solution to solve growing congestion, 66% stated both highways and transit; 19% stated highways only; and, 14% stated transit only.

Support/Opposition to LRT

When asked if they support or oppose light rail transit in the Southwest area, 71% stated they support LRT; 16% stated they oppose LRT; and, the remaining 13% either were neutral or didn't know how they felt about LRT.





KEY STUDY FINDINGS

As part of the study process a significant amount of technical data was generated regarding rail transit. The following are the key study findings. This information was used by both the Southwest Technical Advisory (TAC) and the Southwest Policy Advisory (PAC) Committees when developing their recommendations regarding the future of rail transit in the Southwest Metro Area.

Improve Mobility

A Southwest rail transitway is estimated to carry between 16,500 and 19,500 trips per day, and to reduce travel hours by 90,000 to 330,000 hours per year.

Competitive Travel Choice

A Southwest rail transitway would provide afternoon rush hour travel times that are competitive with the private automobile. Passengers would also benefit from a travel choice not subject to delays caused by weather, congestion and accidents.

Reasonable Cost

The cost to construct a Southwest rail transitway is estimated to range from $431 to $926 million in 2010 dollars. The annual cost to operate a Southwest rail transitway is estimated to range from $7 to $26 million in 2010 dollars.

In terms of capital and operating costs, a Southwest rail transitway is within the range of federally funded light rail transit lines across the country.

Trails & Rails Co-Existence

Trails and rails co-exist in many places around the country, including the Twin Cities. Three examples of trails co-existing with active freight rail lines currently exist in the Study area. They include the Kenilworth Trail in Minneapolis, the Cedar Lake Trail in Minneapolis, and the portions of the Southwest LRT Trail in St. Louis Park and Hopkins.

In the majority of the Southwest, Kenilworth, and Cedar Lakes Corridors, the HCRRA owns approximately 100 feet of right-of-way, which is sufficient for both a trail (10 to 14 feet) and two tracks of rail transit (30 to 35 feet).

Performance

In terms of service efficiency and effectiveness, a Southwest rail transitway is within the range of federally funded light rail transit lines across the country.

Service To Population & Employment

A Southwest rail transitway would serve over 31,000 households and over 200,000 jobs, which are currently located within a 1/2-mile radius of proposed stations.

The Environment

A Southwest rail transitway is projected to reduce carbon monoxide emissions by 72,000 to 180,000 tons annually.

Economic Development/ Redevelopment

Opportunities exist at the proposed stations for development and redevelopment that is compatible with rail transit service. Examples include the Elmwood area of St. Louis Park, downtown Hopkins, the Golden Triangle in Eden Prairie and the Opus area of Minnetonka.

POLICY ADVISORY COMMITTEE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Southwest PAC, a group composed of representatives from the County, the study area cities, transit agencies, trail agencies and businesses, met seven times during the course of the Study and developed a recommendation for consideration by the HCRRA. The Southwest PAC recommended that study continue for LRT for the following four alternatives:

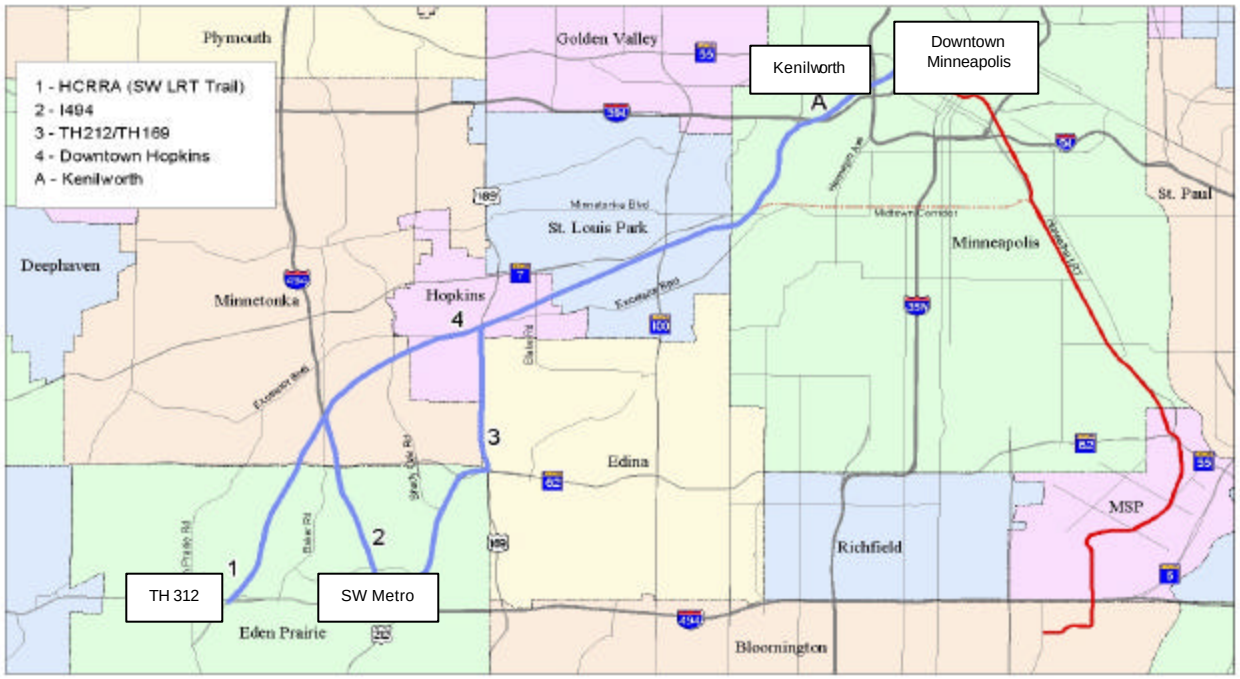
1A: from TH 312 in Eden Prairie to downtown Minneapolis via the HCRRA property and the Kenilworth Corridor. [1]

2A: from the Southwest Metro Transit Station in Eden Prairie to downtown Minneapolis via I-494, the HCRRA property, and the Kenilworth Corridor.

3A: from the Southwest Metro Transit station in Eden Prairie to downtown Minneapolis via the Eden Prairie Center Mall, the Golden Triangle, Opus, downtown Hopkins, the HCRRA property, and the Kenilworth Corridor.

4A: from downtown Hopkins to downtown Minneapolis via the HCRRA property and the Kenilworth Corridor.

In addition, the next study phase will address a rail transit connection along the Midtown Greenway Corridor, environmental impacts and mitigation measures, public involvement, and retention of the trails.



[1] Identified by a vote of 6 to 4 as the least preferred option.