

OPINION EXCHANGE

Counterpoint: Transit may be a wreck, but Met Council didn't derail it

If we followed other cities' unified transit planning, we could have a true Metro.

By Mathews Hollinshead | FEBRUARY 18, 2022 — 5:45PM

In the waning days of Gov. Mark Dayton's administration, I supported the Southwest light rail (SWLRT). It's now clear transitway planning in Minnesota is broken. But it is broken despite, rather than because of, the Metropolitan Council, contrary to "SWLRT wreck came despite plenty of warning" (Opinion Exchange, [Feb. 1](https://www.startribune.com/swlrt-wreck-came-despite-plenty-of-warning/600141642/) (<https://www.startribune.com/swlrt-wreck-came-despite-plenty-of-warning/600141642/>)).

First, about that wonky word "transitway," a unique piece of insider semantics I suspect was coined to enable busways to compete with rail for federal matching funds. In our region it's the only label that denotes both the inconsistency and the rising cost of our biggest transit projects.

Many peer regions around the world use the term "metro" for one uniform system serving all points with a single design. The best are regional, rail and separate from all other traffic, uniform in layout and engineering throughout, able to average very high speed, cross all natural and jurisdictional boundaries and run farther between stops than other transit. They have secure station platforms accessible only on prepayment of fares. Some have safety curtains at platform edges that only rise when train doors open. The best ones act as a regional grid, not hub-and-spoke wheels centered on downtown.

In such regions, patrons live on foot and go anywhere in the region faster than by road.

Some other nations build these systems quickly, at much less cost than we. Here, our transitways have a quality that defeats all others: They are not planned as a regional system. Counties plan alignments and cities plan station areas.

Neither have to deal with the tricky business of building and operating the plans of others, or connecting them in some sort of network.

Hennepin County planned Bottineau assuming Burlington Northern would collaborate, without a binding commitment. Ramsey County is planning Riverview on W. 7th Street in St. Paul, even though W. 7th Street is too narrow for rail and there is a parallel, completely retired rail spur that once served the Ford assembly plant within the same corridor.



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Metro light rail at the Warehouse District / Hennepin stop in downtown Minneapolis.

Hennepin County bought the Kenilworth corridor but not its rail yards, which were sold off for other uses, and then shifted freight traffic there from what is now the Midtown Greenway, creating a choke point.

Northstar was stopped at Big Lake, when it could and should go to St. Cloud.

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Pulling the plug on SWLRT now probably would cost much more than finishing the project, even if the recently discovered cracks in a condo structure prove due to the project. (But recent reporting indicates cracks had previously developed during a townhouse addition.)

The Met Council is stuck with all these and other flaws over which it has little control. It can reject or revise transitway plans, but not create them.

In light of SWLRT's problems, rail transit opponents at the Legislature are once again floating fake solutions — for example, handing transitway planning to the Minnesota Department of Transportation, an agency with no metro transit mission and little to do with rail.

Minnesota's three completed rail transitway projects — the Blue Line, the Green Line and Northstar Commuter Rail — were on time and on budget. Perhaps that made leaders overconfident. Minnesota is not immune to that.

Let regional leaders lead the region, not just get stuck with the flawed plans of others. Give the Metropolitan Council authority, money and tools to do for regional transit what it has done for regional sewers and parks. It could then create a single-mode, metro-wide system that gets riders everywhere (not just downtown), complemented by Arterial Bus Rapid Transit (ABRT) and local bus lines, with development concentrated at walkable station areas.

Oh, about SWLRT's rising cost: Guesstimate the metro motor vehicle fleet at two million; multiply by \$10,000 average annual cost to each owner (per AAA), or \$20 billion per year. Not only that, car prices are soaring. Can you still afford one? Can the region still afford such auto-dependency, environmentally or economically?

It's time we had unified regional transit planning, construction and operation — a true Metro.

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