

THE MIDTOWN STREETCAR

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VISION

The Midtown Streetcar is a proposed streetcar that would run 4.4 miles along the Midtown Greenway from the Hiawatha LRT to the future Southwest LRT. The Midtown Greenway is a former freight rail trench in south Minneapolis that was purchased by the Hennepin County Regional Railroad Authority in 1993 for the purpose of future transit. After its transformation into a public space with bicycling and walking trails, today the Midtown Greenway is the busiest commuter bikeway in Minnesota. With part of the multi-modal vision for the Midtown Greenway achieved, the streetcar is the next component. The vision for the Midtown Streetcar is an important link in the region's transportation network that connects two LRT lines in south Minneapolis while stopping at key Lake Street business nodes and employment centers.



A rendering of the Midtown Streetcar in the Midtown Greenway. Source: John DeWitt.

CONNECTIONS: LAKE STREET

One block south of the Midtown Greenway is Lake Street, a vibrant commercial corridor with numerous destinations including hundreds of shopping, dining, and entertainment options. For over a century, Lake Street has been a location where new immigrants and other first-time business owners have set up shop. A Midtown Streetcar that supports and connects to the Lake Street business community is a high priority for the Midtown Greenway Lake Street corridor and the Midtown Community Works Partnership.

Current Lake Street bus transit carries riders directly although slowly past the storefronts of local businesses. There is some concern that without that visual connection, riders will limit their shopping or make transit connections without interacting with the neighborhood. A the streetcar on the Greenway could assist express commutes, poses fewer construction challenges, traffic interference, or parking loss, particularly salient issues following Lake Street's extensive reconstruction. Furthermore, the physical elements of the streetcar from station access and egress placement, to lighting and lines of sight can be designed to orient riders toward Lake Street.

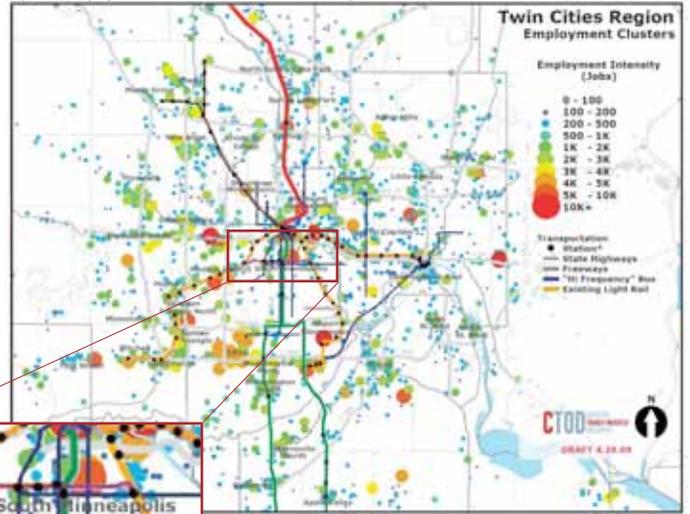
Without having to navigate traffic, travel times will be substantially faster, making Lake Street seem closer and more convenient to a larger population. The streetcar would offer travel time savings over existing bus service, providing a ride from Hiawatha to Hennepin in mere 10-13 minutes instead of the current 20-34 minutes.



Looking from a future Midtown Streetcar station location toward Lake Street.

CONNECTIONS: EMPLOYMENT CENTERS

The Midtown Streetcar will provide more convenient and frequent transit service to the Midtown employment center. The area just north of the Midtown Corridor between I-35W and Chicago Avenue is home to several major employers including Allina, Abbott Northwestern Hospital, Children’s Hospital and Wells Fargo Home Mortgage. Employing 14,000 people together, this represents one of the largest employment concentrations in Minneapolis and is among the major employment clusters in the Twin Cities region.



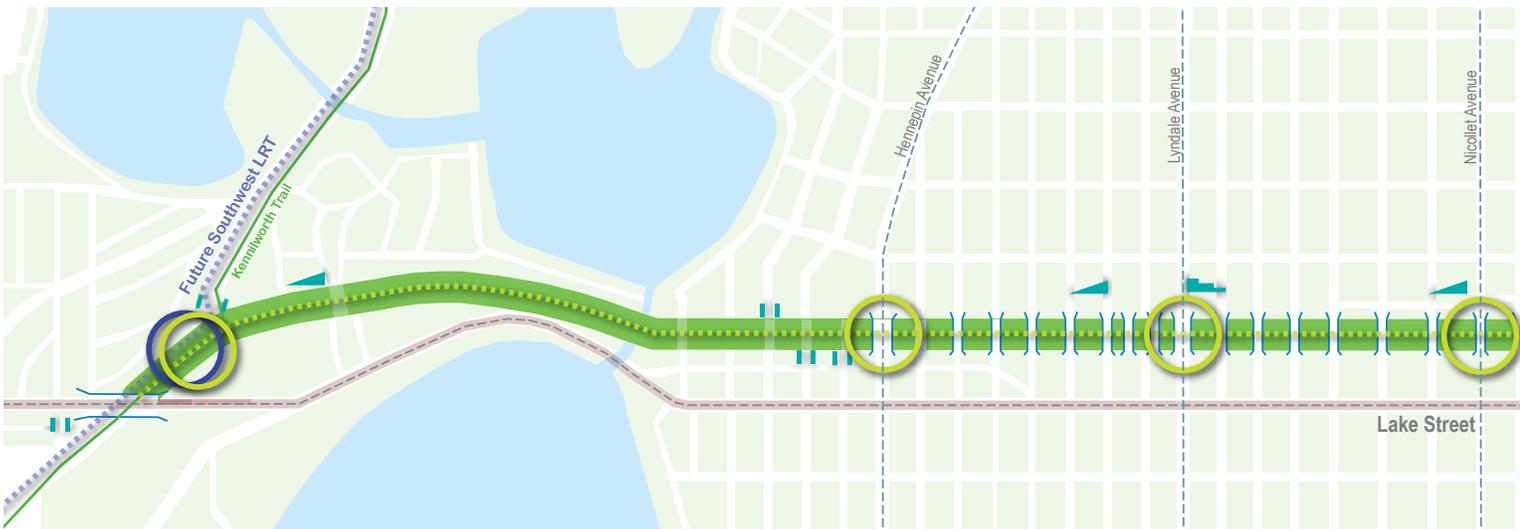
Employment Clusters connected by 2030 Transit. Source: CTOD.

Connections to suburban jobs will also be improved by the Midtown Streetcar. Currently, a transit trip takes at an hour or more from the Midtown Minneapolis area to the Opus campus or the Golden Triangle. With the Midtown Streetcar and the Southwest LRT service, this time would be cut in half.

STATION DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

Connecting the Midtown Streetcar stations to the surrounding business destinations along Lake Street and to the Midtown employers will need to be considered in station design. Ways to achieve this could include:

- Extending the active retail uses that populate Lake Street to the stations themselves and even into the Greenway itself.
- Consistent wayfinding signage at both street level and greenway level;



- Station naming that reflects the local institutions nearby;
- Protecting the high bicycle commuting ridership on the Midtown Greenway by ensuring that transit patrons don't have to cross over the bicycle path to exit the stations.

RESULTS FROM PREVIOUS STUDIES

There have been three previous studies completed: the 29th Street and Southwest Corridors Vintage Rail Trolley Study, completed in 2000 for Hennepin County; the Feasibility of a Single-Track Vintage Trolley in the Midtown Greenway, completed in 2001 for the Midtown Greenway Coalition; and the Minneapolis Streetcar Feasibility Study, completed for the City of Minneapolis in 2007.

RIDERSHIP

The ridership estimates produced by the feasibility studies range from 3,300 to 7,300 daily riders. The 3,300 ridership estimate from the Minneapolis Streetcar Study was completed as part of the Southwest LRT Alternatives Analysis work. This estimate assumed that the Southwest LRT would use the rail corridor to Eden Prairie – not the route chosen that will travel through the Golden Triangle and Opus areas that have 50,000 jobs. The Minneapolis Streetcar Study does not explicitly assume a significant diversion of ridership from current Lake Street bus Routes 21 and 53, which is estimated at approximately 16,000 riders from Hiawatha to Hennepin. The 29th Street Study produced the 7,300 estimate for a busway in the Midtown Greenway but assumed a penalty for streetcar transit not making a direct connection to the Hiawatha LRT line and reduced the streetcar estimate to 6,100. The Single-Track Study did not complete separate ridership modeling but assumed the Hiawatha LRT connection must be made and used the 7,300 estimate.

Stations

- West Lake - Southwest LRT
- Hennepin Avenue
- Lyndale Avenue
- Nicollet Avenue
- I-35W - 35W BRT
- Chicago Avenue
- Cedar Avenue
- Lake St. - Hiawatha LRT

Other stations have been considered at Lake Calhoun Parkway or Dean Parkway, at 4th Avenue and at Bloomington Avenue in lieu of the Cedar Avenue station.



FREQUENCY & OPERATING COSTS

The Minneapolis Streetcar Study assumed frequencies that match current Hiawatha LRT service: 7.5 minutes during peak times, 10 minutes during the day and 15 minutes in the evening with 23 hours of service on weekdays. The estimated operating cost for this service was \$4 million per year. The previous studies assumed more limited service (10 minute peak service and 15-20 minute off-peak service for 16 hours per day) and lower operating costs of \$2.2-2.9 million.



A preliminary concept for the West Lake Streetcar plan shows a connection to the Midtown Streetcar. Source: www.southwesttransitway.

COST

The most recent cost estimate is from the Minneapolis Streetcar Funding Study, which estimated the capital cost at \$87 to \$115 million in 2012 dollars depending on the type of track. Previous study estimates ranged from \$53 million (Single Track Study) to \$84 million dollars (29th Street Study) in 2005 dollars. The range of these estimates is based off of differing assumptions about the construction - the amount of track, the type of streetcar vehicles and many more options that can enhance service but also add to cost.

FINANCING

A variety of financing options for the Midtown Streetcar have been considered but more work needs to be done to complete a financing plan. In 2006, the MCW Partnership took a trip to Portland to learn about the Portland Streetcar financing sources which included parking revenue bonds, a Local Improvement District, tax increment financing (TIF) and another half dozen sources. An assessment of some of these tools by the MCW Partnership in 2008 found that tax increment financing is more likely to enjoy local support than a special assessment district. The MCW Partnership also learned about a TIF for Transit/TOD bill that was considered at the Minnesota state legislature in 2010 and may be presented again in the future.

The Minneapolis Streetcar Funding Study analyzed revenue sources for the Midtown Streetcar line, including the following: federal funding for 50% of capital costs; operating revenues; regional and private funding for 10% of capital and operating costs; a 25% increase in parking revenue within ¼ mile of streetcar line; and either limited City property tax abatement for 10 years within ¼ mile of stations or a Special District assessment on commercial and some multifamily property within ¼ mile of stations. Together, these funds would not be adequate to fund the Midtown Streetcar given the assumptions in the study. The federal funding environment for streetcar projects recently has become much more favorable. Federal program sources that have awarded streetcar grants in 2009 and 2010 include FTA's Small Starts Program, the Urban Circulator grant program and the TIGER grant program.

WHAT'S NEXT

FUTURE TRANSITWAY STUDY EFFORTS

In its draft 2030 Transportation Policy Plan, the Metropolitan Council identified the Midtown Corridor as one that should be examined further to see if a connector between Hiawatha and Southwest is warranted. This examination may take the form of an Alternatives Analysis, the first step in the official study process necessary for federal funding.