
Key Questions Remain About the Impact of Future Transit and Highway Options

SUMMARY

The Twin Cities area needs to be better prepared to address future transportation problems, according to a report issued by the Legislative Auditor's Office. The Metropolitan Council is projecting a 29 percent growth in population and a 46 percent growth in the number of vehicle miles traveled in the Twin Cities area by the year 2020. However, as policy makers consider ways of limiting the growth in congestion, the impact of various policy options on congestion and other transportation problems is unclear.

There is no shortage of possible options. They include expanded bus service, implementation of commuter or light rail transit, construction of high-occupancy vehicle lanes or transitways, further improvements in traffic management, additional highway expansion, reduced bus fares, and the use of parking or congestion pricing strategies. In addition, there has been much planning work devoted to studying many of these policy options. However, some key questions remain unanswered. It is unclear how these various options compare in terms of their ability to reduce congestion or address other transportation objectives. It is also not entirely clear how the costs and benefits of the various options

compare with another when parking and other automobile operating costs, as well as pollution costs to society, are included.

Program Evaluation Report **Transit Services** *February 6, 1998*

Key Findings:

- Transit spending and services in the Twin Cities area have grown over the last 10 years, but ridership has declined.
- In recent years, transit ridership per capita has been declining faster in the Twin Cities area than in comparable urban areas.
- It is unclear from existing studies how much transit or highway improvements would affect future congestion in the Twin Cities area.
- Overall transit ridership in outstate Minnesota has been relatively constant over the last decade, despite significant growth in rural spending and services.

Recommendations:

- The Metropolitan Council, with assistance from Mn/DOT, should provide policy makers with better information on future congestion and better analysis of transportation options in the Twin Cities area.
- In measuring the success of current or future efforts to improve transit ridership, the Metropolitan Council should exclude transfers from its ridership counts.

*The report is available at our web site:
<http://www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us/pe9803.htm>.
Copies of the full report or summary are also available by
calling 612/296-4708.*

The report recommends that the Metropolitan Council, with assistance from the Minnesota Department of Transportation (Mn/DOT), provide policy makers with information and analysis to address these concerns. The report also recommends that these agencies should provide better information on their projections of future congestion. Existing analyses fail to provide a clear picture of how much congestion is expected to grow in the absence of an increase in spending on highways and transit.

Despite the concerns raised about long-range planning, the report gives the Metropolitan Council and Mn/DOT high marks for some of their efforts to improve transit. The Metropolitan Council has been involved with redesigning transit services to improve the cost-effectiveness of transit and better meet the needs of transit users. Within the constitutional constraints on the use of gasoline and motor vehicle registration taxes, Mn/DOT has cooperated with other

agencies to add transit-friendly infrastructure such as park-and-ride lots, ramp bypasses for transit and carpoolers, and bus shoulder lanes.

The study also found that the Twin Cities area provides less transit service per capita than the average for 32 urban areas with populations between 0.9 and 4 million. In 1995, the amount of service per capita in the Twin Cities area ranked 23rd highest and transit operating expenditures per capita ranked 19th highest.

Transit ridership is high considering the area's relatively low population density and high number of roadway miles per capita. Transit ridership ranked 18th highest out of 32 areas in 1995. In addition, 1990 Census data show that the Twin Cities area ranked in the top one-third of urban areas in the percentage of morning commuters using transit.

However, recent declines in ridership should be a cause for concern. Twin Cities transit ridership per capita fell 21 percent between 1988 and 1995 compared with an average decline of 6 percent in other urban areas. Faster rising transit fares in the Twin Cities may explain some of this difference. In addition, service cuts have been made to some of the region's more productive transit routes in the urban core.

The Twin Cities relies on property taxes to a degree that is unique among the urban areas we studied. Dedicated property taxes provide 43 percent of the transit operating funds in the Twin Cities area compared with an average of 2 percent elsewhere. Most other large urban areas rely more heavily on sales, income, or gasoline taxes. The Minnesota Constitution requires gasoline taxes to be used for highways.

The study also examined transit services in outstate Minnesota, which have grown significantly over the last decade particularly in rural areas. There has been more than a 60 percent increase in the number of transit systems and a 23 percent growth in operating costs between 1986 and 1996. Despite this trend, overall ridership has remained about the same due to ridership declines in Duluth and several other outstate cities. The report recommends that Mn/DOT more closely review the performance of outstate transit systems that are experiencing ridership or other performance problems.

Copies of the report, entitled *Transit Services*, may be obtained from the Office of the Legislative Auditor at 612/296-4708 or at <http://www.auditor.leg.state.mn.us/pe9803.htm>. For further information, contact John Yunker, Elliot Long, or Roger Brooks at 296-4708.