

March 29, 2007

Downtown Zone Extension Pilot Final Report & Data Analysis

BACKGROUND

In late November 2004, a consortium of interests at the south end of the Minneapolis downtown fare zone approached Metro Transit with a proposal to expand the reduced fare zone to the Walker Art Center on Hennepin Avenue and to I-94 on Nicollet Avenue. The proposal was a joint suggestion of these groups: The Women's Club of Minneapolis, Walker Art Center, Basilica of St. Mary, Cathedral of St. Mark, Hennepin Avenue United Methodist Church, Youth Link and Citizens for a Loring Park Community. Legislative, County and City officials also endorsed the proposal.

The proposal led to a March 2005 meeting among Metro Transit executives and community leaders. At the meeting, Metro Transit General Manager Brian Lamb suggested a pilot program to test the ridership potential of an expanded downtown zone. Given that Metro Transit was facing service cuts and a fare increase in 2005, the parties agreed a better time to test the concept was the summer of 2006. That timing also permitted Metro Transit to complete deployment of automatic passengers counters on a portion of its fleet. These counters would be useful in collecting ridership data before and during the pilot test. In addition, Metro Transit said the test should involve off-peak weekday hours and all day on weekends, fearing the peak-period buses would be full in the face of the service cuts.

GOAL

To triple transit ridership at the bus stops added to the downtown zone while not substantially altering ridership at stops just beyond the newly expanded zone during a pilot test that would run from Memorial Day to Labor Day 2006.

MARKETING

Metro Transit's marketing department worked closely with the community group to promote the expanded downtown zone. These tactics were employed:

- Posters were distributed to businesses, residents in the expanded area, transit stores and selected outlets that sell transit passes.
- Four 4-color, half-page advertisements were placed in the Minneapolis *Downtown Journal*.
- Ride-the-Zone magnets were handed out at Movies in the Park and at the Metro Transit booth at the GLBT Pride Festival.
- News release was issued in May
- Outreach to the *Downtown Journal* and WCCO-AM resulted in a news stories on the pilot.
- Informational copy was distributed to area churches for inclusion in church bulletins and other communications tools.
- Promotional posters were placed throughout the summer at all Nicollet Mall on-street kiosks.

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- Stories about the zone expansion were printed in the May, June and August editions of *TakeOut*, Metro Transit's on-board customer newsletter.
- Web site metrotransit.org was updated to reflect the expansion and included updated text and map. A rotating banner ad was created and implemented to draw attention to the expansion.
- An e-mail alert was distributed to the 3,000 member of the Ride to Rewards program.
- A poster PDF was e-mailed to downtown Minneapolis Metropass administrators at more than 100 companies for distribution to their employees
- The first two weeks and again in mid-July for two weeks, Metro Transit posted promotional 4-color Rider Alert posters at bus stops on Hennepin and Nicollet Mall.
- Redesigned the Downtown Zone brochure to reflect the expansion pilot and distributed throughout downtown Minneapolis to partners who display transit information.

METHODOLOGY

Prior to the pilot test, Metro Transit collected ridership data in April and May at the impacted stops used by routes 17 and 18 on Nicollet and by routes 4, 6 and 12 on Hennepin. Similar data was collected in July and August when the test was nearing its end.

RESULTS

- Prior to the test 3,218 average weekly boardings and alightings were observed at the stops in the area targeted for expansion.
- During the test average weekly boardings and alightings increased 317 to 3,535, a 10 percent increase.
- Average weekly boardings and alightings at the bus stops just outside the expanded zone decreased by 500 from 14,795 to 14, 295, a 3.5 percent decrease.
- Average weekend boardings and alightings increased from 731 to 866, or 18%. This was offset by a decrease in boardings and alightings at the stops just outside the expansion zone from 3,203 to 3,076, a -4% decrease.
- Best results were observed on the Nicollet Avenue extension on weekdays with northbound boardings and southbound alightings increasing about 28 percent, or about 55 additional daily trips.

RECOMMENDATION/NEXT STEPS

The downtown zone expansion pilot failed to reach its objectives with ridership increasing 10 percent rather than 300 percent.

Given the results, the test should not be repeated, and the zone should not be expanded at this time.

Nevertheless, the pilot test, coupled with the Access Minneapolis 10-year transportation planning effort, has focused Metro Transit on the boundaries and pricing of the downtown zones in both Minneapolis and St. Paul. A comprehensive analysis will be undertaken and completed by Service Development in 2007.

