
Better Transit Service for Dakota County Employers and Residents: 2020 Needs and Recommendations

By



With support from



Investors



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Introduction: Dakota County businesses need more and better transit service

The Dakota County Regional Chamber of Commerce (DCRC) surveys its more than 600 members annually on their policy concerns. In 2019, DCRC members identified more and better public transit as their top policy priority. Close behind as priorities were accessibility to housing and to workforce, both of which would be improved with better transit.

What would transit service that addressed Dakota County employer needs look like?

To answer, DCRC partnered with Dakota County employers and the Dakota County Community and Technical College to:

- Understand and document current and future unmet transit and mobility needs
- Identify what barriers and opportunities exist to meet these needs
- Recommend options for meeting those needs by improving service in the short- and long-term.

The investors in this study are members of DCRC, including Blue Cross Blue/Shield, Dakota Electric, Dakota Community and Technical College, Ecolab, the Minnesota Vikings, MV Eagan Ventures, Prime Therapeutics, TC Orthopedics, and Thomson Reuters. DCRC was supported in this work by East Metro Strong and by consultant Huitt-Zollars.

DCRC, East Metro Strong, and Huitt-Zollars met with and surveyed County employers, and staff from jurisdictions within Dakota County throughout the project. We reviewed and discussed existing service options and future plans by the County and by local transit providers, as well as regional transit plans. Together, that input and detailed review produced these findings and recommendations.

1. Dakota County's transit needs

Dakota County wants to continue to grow. To do so, the county needs to connect people to important destinations, including jobs, education, shopping, medical, recreation, and a wide array of housing.

Dakota County employers face increasing difficulty finding workers. Both employers and candidates identify lack transit as part of the problem. Human service agencies also face challenges providing basic transit service to the elderly, low-income and disabled populations in many parts of Dakota County.

Overall, today's Dakota County transit system:

- primarily connects to Minneapolis and Saint Paul;
- primarily connects people to jobs in Minneapolis and Saint Paul;
- prioritizes 9:00 – 5:00 jobs;
- in only one direction.

Regular route services are provided in part by Metro Transit (northern part of County) and in part by Minnesota Valley Transit Authority (MVTA) on the western and southern edges of the County.

The current approach produces a number of gaps, challenges, and needs:

- There are no direct transit services to Inver Hills Community College or the Dakota County Technical College campus.

- Regular route services mainly focus on trips linking Dakota County residents working near or in Downtown Minneapolis and Saint Paul, with limited reverse commute opportunities for workers employed within Dakota County or students attending educational facilities within Dakota County but living outside of the area.
- No service connects workers with less traditional hours to arrive into Dakota County for staggered or shift work, or to return to other parts of the region when their work is done, making it difficult for many Dakota County employers with varying employee needs or students who have different class schedules.
- Existing routes utilize transfers at specific transit hubs located in and near Dakota County (i.e., Burnsville Transit Hub, Cedar Avenue corridor, etc.). In many cases employees using transit to get to work in the County spend substantial additional time having to make indirect transfers on non-express routes which take them out of the way or require a long walk to their destination.
- Few or no local routes connect employees living in other parts of Dakota County (primarily eastern and southern areas like Farmington, Lakeville and Rosemount/UMore Park) with a direct connection to high-employment areas in the western/northern parts of the county. Of particular significance is the lack of east/west corridor service linking to north/south established and planned transit routes (i.e., Cedar Avenue and I-35W high-speed service), especially south of County Road 42.

As a result, jobs and other destinations in Dakota County are not served well by existing transit services. According to 2017 Census data, over fourteen percent (14%) of the county's workforce lives in Minneapolis or Saint Paul and commutes to the major employment centers near the I-35E/Highway 55 intersection, or within the cities of Eagan and Burnsville. Yet existing service provides very few routes to these jobs, most of which run infrequently during the traditional workday, and not serving shift and service workers or those living in other areas of the county.

Residents traveling within Dakota County face similar challenges. In particular, east/west corridor travel from one side of the county to the other is difficult to make, or not served at all. Far southeastern and southern areas of the County are not linked by any transit to northern destinations or even to existing hubs where transfers could be made. Circuitous routes make the network challenging to understand, many routes are infrequent, and there is no "one stop shop" combining information about available services that would make it easier for Dakota County residents to consider and use transit options for in-county trips.

In sum, employers have stated that they need access to employees who live in and out of the County. Residents across the county do not have equal access to a viable, connected network of transit options. It is also true that connecting the many diverse communities in Dakota County is a challenge for a variety of reasons. What would a transit system that works for Dakota County's unique needs look like?

2. Concrete steps for providing better transit service to people and employers in Dakota County

2020 presents an excellent opportunity to begin redesigning Dakota County's regional transit system to better serve its constituents. The COVID19 pandemic has emphasized how much essential workers rely on transit, and the County has two important specific opportunities:

- The County is currently in the process of developing its 2040 Transportation Plan.
- The Metropolitan Council continues to identify future on-street ("arterial") BRT lines, including a possible BRT line along Robert Street with a terminus in northern Dakota County.

In order to position Dakota County for future economic growth and prosperity that encompasses both its businesses and residents, we recommend six strategies:

1. *Expand existing local fixed-route and on-demand service*

Redesign local fixed route and on demand services to target areas within Dakota County with large employment hubs and popular destinations (medical, shopping, educational, etc.)

2. *Create transit hubs to connect the whole network*

Establish additional county-wide transit “hubs” along highways and arterials that connect both east/west and north/south transit services in order to facilitate a regional transit service connection grid, especially in the northeastern and south/southeastern portions of the county.

3. *Provide 2-way direct service between these hubs*

Develop point-to-point service (intra-county and reverse commute from outside of county) between the county-wide transit hubs.

4. *Use new transit technologies to connect jobs to these hubs*

New transit technologies (i.e., micromobility options, demand-responsive last mile services, coordinated mobile applications, ridesharing services, targeted employer vanpools, etc.) can easily, rapidly, and in cases spontaneously connect riders to jobs and education sites.

5. *Design and build future development for transit services*

Incorporate accessibility to transit services into neighborhood and business park street design, building setbacks, sidewalks, parking facilities, right-of-way, and parks and trails planning.

6. *Define a stable countywide funding source with which to meet the County’s transit needs, and advocate for federal and state funding.*

The benefits of improved transit service will be broad. The County’s quarter-cent sales tax and \$20 excise tax on new vehicle sales fund Dakota County transit and transportation projects. This funding can and should support many of the strategies outlined here. Within that funding pool, it would be useful to define a stable stream that would support steady progress toward goals. A funded strategic plan would help compete for federal and state funds. Specific investments and operations budgets may benefit from cost-sharing with particular destinations.

Dakota County has invested substantially in focused regional transit infrastructure projects such as the Red Line and Cedar Avenue Transitway. Now the County needs to work on increasing transit access countywide for its businesses and residents by improving service and increasing mobility options. The role of traditional suburban-to-urban core fixed transit service in a post-COVID19 future is unclear.¹ Regardless, it is clear that the County needs additional kinds of services to serve other needs and markets.

¹ Note that with distancing and masking, using transit is just as safer, and in many cases safer, than many other regular activities. We also expect that a vaccine will be developed. When we say that the role of traditional routes serving, say, downtown Minneapolis is unclear, that is driven by potential permanent increases in remote work for

To begin implementing the six identified strategies, we propose further study and discussion on the following 14 key actions.

| Strategy | Actions |
|---|---|
| <p><i>I. Expand & improve existing service</i></p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Immediately establish a countywide Transportation Management Organization (TMO) to develop and coordinate employer transit services in coordination with local transit providers and the Metropolitan Council. 2. Working with the TMO, obtain County and regional funds for targeted vanpool services and other micromobility options. 3. Improve existing local fixed route and demand responsive bus service by adding service hours, frequency and service areas. 4. Develop coordinated demand responsive transit services in conjunction with human service providers and expand service areas within the county to residents and employers. Expand TransitLink service area and service hours. 5. Add stops on existing intercity lines within Dakota County. 6. Improve local service in Hastings 7. Modify Metro Transit-defined transit markets across the county to reflect Dakota County job concentrations. |
| <p><i>II. Create transit hubs</i></p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 8. Consider creating a new transit hub for the I-35/Highway 55 major employment center. 9. Create a new transit center at the southern terminus of the proposed Robert Street bus rapid transit (BRT) line and support the BRT corridor. |
| <p><i>III. Provide direct (point-to-point) service connecting these hubs</i></p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Redesign services between county hubs to provide frequent direct connections in both directions throughout the day at county/regional transit hubs, especially in high-employment areas and at educational facilities. 11. Add a direct route(s) from Hastings to the rest of the county and regional network. 12. Add east/west corridor arterial bus service south of County Rd 42 across the county. |
| <p><i>IV. Use new technologies to feed these hubs</i></p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 13. Use new micro-mobility technologies and shared mobility options to provide on-demand service to jobs. |
| <p><i>V. Plan and build development for transit</i></p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 14. Amend residential and arterial street planning processes and policies to include accessibility for transit services for all users. |

economic reasons, not for COVID reasons. As Dakota County grows and diversifies its job base, it will inevitably see more jobs that must be done in person.

These action items are grouped by strategy rather than in order of ease or urgency. In general, the steps to expand and improve existing service are nearer-term options. However, as the county seeks to position itself for recovery and growth, designing for convenient transit access and creating hubs to facilitate services is also critically important.

An immediate example is the Viking Lakes development. While not yet fully built out, the employers in that area are asking for improved transit service delivery. However, the street layout within the development is challenging and time-consuming for local route service providers, as it requires a circuitous, complicated route. One possibility that should be considered is to establish a small transit hub facility within the area that provides a good connection point for other routes in the area and region. This area is included a case study in an Appendix to the Huitt-Zollars report.

3. Next steps for Dakota County and its partners

Dakota County employers have identified a lack of good transit as a barrier to growth and identified more expansive and better transit service as their top policy priority. This summary and the accompanying detailed report describe a strategic approach to meeting *employer* needs, and at the same time better connect Dakota County *residents* to jobs, education, and services.

Dakota County is currently in the process of developing a long-range 2040 Transportation Plan. We urge the County to consider the strategic approach as outlined in this document for inclusion into the Plan.

The County can begin to implement some of the specific recommended implementation actions on its own. Many of the other actions will require coordination with others including regional transit providers, the Metropolitan Council, local jurisdictions, and the general public.

In many cases these other actions must be led by others, with little or no County role other than strong support and advocacy. For example, only the Metropolitan Council can change its definition of “transit market areas” so that Metro Transit can provide better service to portions of Dakota County, although the County can begin that discussion today.

Dakota County has an indispensable role in meeting the transit needs of its employers and residents. The County must provide the overall vision and plan and, as it does for many other needs, funding where necessary. In doing so, it can help ensure the growth and prosperity of employers and residents for the next 20 years and beyond.