

INSIGHTS

Metro Transit's weekly employee newsletter

May 22, 2020



Crews worked on an underpass that will bring the Cedar Lake Trail beneath Wooddale Avenue last week as construction continued in St. Louis Park and other cities that will be served by the METRO Green Line Extension. The new underpass is adjacent to the future Wooddale Avenue Station and is one of several improvements to the regional trail being made as part of the light rail project. For the latest information on the Green Line Extension visit metro council.org.

What to know this week

Free COVID-19 testing available: All Metro Transit employees can now get tested for COVID-19, whether or not they are showing symptoms. Free tests are available at HealthPartners and Park Nicollet drive-up sites and at the HealthPartners Well@Work Clinic at the Heywood Office. To make a drive-up test appointment call 952-853-8690 and tell the scheduler you are a “transit essential worker.” To make an appointment at the Well@Work Clinic call 952-967-7468. Results will be provided in two to three days.

Child care leave policy to be adjusted: With changes likely effective June 13, child care leave will still be available but not at the same level as before. Council employees who cannot work remotely and are caring for a child whose summer school, place of care or regular childcare provider are unavailable due to COVID-19 will be eligible to take up to 12 weeks of paid leave at two-thirds their regular pay rate. Those teleworking will continue to do so through the summer and may use the child care leave intermittently, if needed. Employees who go on leave may supplement their pay or extend their leave using accrued leave balances. To access paid leave, employees must submit a request form and additional information about why other suitable childcare is unavailable. More information about the Council's updated Paid COVID-19 Leave policy is expected to be shared soon.

Legislature adjourns without acting on bonding, administrative citations: State lawmakers adjourned earlier this week without approving a bonding bill or acting on proposed security measures related to transit. The funding and policy proposals may be addressed in an upcoming special session. Gov. Tim Walz had proposed \$55 million in state bonding for two planned Bus Rapid Transit lines that would substantially replace routes 5 and 21. Walz also proposed an administrative citations program to improve fare compliance. The legislative process was disrupted by the state's response to COVID-19, which led lawmakers to reprioritize and adapt to remote work.

Pandemic makes service planning more important than ever

From Adam Harrington,
Director of Service Development

Scheduled service changes are always a blend of science and art.



Ridership, construction, operator and customer feedback, and staffing levels all influence our decision making. We also make estimates about where added service can better serve new and existing riders.

Those same considerations factored into the service changes taking effect next month. But layered on top of these factors is one of the biggest challenges we've ever faced – the COVID-19 pandemic and our response to it.

Uncertainty about the number of available operators and how soon people will return to transit led us to ask operators to pick their next work assignments based on two service level scenarios – one representing about 65% of regular service levels, and another that is closer to 80%.

Schedules that will go into effect on June 13 will keep service at about the same level it's at today – roughly 65% what it was at the beginning of the year – with some minor adjustments to add peak-hour service. Light rail and Northstar schedules will remain as is.

As more operators return, we may add more service before the next scheduled service changes take effect this fall.

While ridership has leveled out at about 75% below normal, there is reason to believe more customers will be back in the coming months. Conversations with downtown business leaders and others suggest a slow return to work starting this summer, while retailers and restaurants are being allowed to reopen in a limited fashion.

There remains a lot to learn about the lasting impacts COVID-19 will have on commuting habits, schools and the large events we've become such an integral part of. The next round of schedule changes was moved from August 22 to September 12 so we could better account for the

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developments that take place in the months ahead.

While we focus on the near-term, we are also thinking of the future. Plans for additional Bus Rapid Transit lines are progressing and we will continue to develop a long-term vision for our bus network, Network Next, over the next year.

As we continue to adapt, I want to express my sincere appreciation for the work that's being done not just in Service Development but across the organization.

Support has come from many corners – Finance and Strategic Initiatives, which provide and interpret the ridership data we need to make informed decisions; Marketing & Transit Information, which clearly present our plans to the public; and of course, our bus and rail operations departments that put our service plans into action.

Together, we are doing all we can to help our organization, our customers and our community safely get through this crisis without losing sight of the long-term goals we've all worked so hard to achieve.

Dynamic bus lane provides transit advantage during bridgework

A bus lane will help buses move in and out of downtown Minneapolis as repairs are made to the 102-year-old Third Avenue/Central Avenue Bridge spanning the Mississippi River.

State-led bridge repairs began on Monday, reducing general traffic on the bridge to one lane in each direction. Between these general purpose lanes, a new bus lane was created so buses could bypass traffic. Portions of the bus lane have been painted red to redirect traffic.

Until noon each day, the bus lane will be used by buses entering downtown from Northeast Minneapolis; beginning at 12:10 p.m., buses departing downtown Minneapolis will use the bus lane.

Transit signals and city traffic control agents will also be used to help maintain reliable service during construction.

Routes 10, 17, 25, 250, 264 and 270 will use the bus lane. Some routes that would normally operate on the Third Avenue Bridge are not in service due to COVID-19 related service adjustments.

In January, the Third Avenue Bridge will close for two years. During that time, buses will be rerouted to the Hennepin Avenue Bridge to the north.

Metro Transit and the City of Minneapolis continue to discuss opportunities for temporary and permanent bus lanes and other transit advantages throughout the city.

CUSTOMERS TELL US HOW WE'RE DOING

"The driver was amazing"

Heywood Operator **Michael Alexander** recently impressed a Route 18 customer with his safe driving skills.

I was on a northbound Route 18G this morning and the driver was amazing. I did not think it was possible to drive an articulated bus along such narrow streets but he killed it! He made the turns safely, kept us on schedule and was friendly.

Kelly Prosen
Minneapolis

Drop in ridership, traffic impacts April performance measures

April was an unusual month for Metro Transit – and the data proves it.

In the first full month of the state's stay-at-home order, ridership was down about 72% compared to the same month last year. In all, more than 1.9 million rides were provided in April, or an average of 50,000 to 70,000 rides per day.

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted several other performance measures, including bus on-time performance, which increased to 91%, and the rate of bus and customer accidents, which was at its lowest level since 2004.

The average distance between bus failures also rose to 9,230 miles in April, the best performance for that month since 2003. The improved performance was attributed largely to a continued emphasis on preventative maintenance, as well as a recent focus on cooling systems.

In This Together: Mouctar Sow, Nicollet Operator

Employees across the organization are contributing to Metro Transit's COVID-19 response. To share your story or suggest someone who is doing outstanding work, e-mail insights@metrotransit.org.



How has the pandemic affected your day-to-day work?

I wear a mask, carry hand sanitizer with me all the time and constantly wash my hands. With no on-board fare payment, I don't see customers much anymore. I just drive, which in some ways is good -- it keeps the bus moving for those using it for essential trips only.

How has your life changed outside of work?

During Ramadan, I usually head right to the mosque at the end of my shift to break fast and pray. However, mosques are now closed. I'm still able to fast during the day, but instead of breaking fast with family and friends at the mosque, I go home to my wife and three kids. We break fast and pray at home instead. It is still a good way for us to observe Ramadan, but it's not the same as the larger community getting together.

Ramadan is one of the holiest months of the year for Muslims. During Ramadan, Muslims fast during sunlit hours and spend extra time praying. This year, Ramadan continues through May 23.



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