

INSIGHTS

Metro Transit's weekly employee newsletter

August 14, 2020



Instructors, **CJ Camp**, left, and **Jean Hammonds**, right, will soon become state-certified, third-party Commercial Drivers License testers who can administer the state's road test, one of the most significant hurdles to becoming a bus operator or mechanic technician at Metro Transit. Their certifications follow weeks of classroom training and a difficult final exam, which they each passed on their first attempt. "I'm looking forward to this because it's a chance to help people go further in life," said Hammonds, who began as a part-time bus operator 32 years ago. While operator hiring has been paused, Camp and Hammonds will put their certifications to use when they train and test a group of prospective technicians in the final stages of the Metro Transit Technician Training program. The program offers participants a paid Metro Transit internship and can help cover some of the costs of earning an associates degree. "I couldn't believe how well it worked out," Instruction Center Manager Dan Stoffer said. "I'm really proud of them and am especially happy they'll be able to immediately apply what they've learned."

Local bus, light rail service approach pre-COVID levels in Sept.

Beginning Saturday, Sept. 12, service on light rail and many local bus routes will increase to nearly pre-pandemic levels while service on the METRO A Line and METRO C Line will be fully restored.

Commute-oriented express bus routes and the Northstar Commuter Rail Line will continue to operate on limited schedules. More than 50 express routes will remain suspended.

The changes reflect continued growth in ridership and efforts to support recommended social distancing guidelines. July's ridership was nearly 2.4 million, a 31% increase from June's total.

In addition to more trips, other notable changes being made in September include:

- To improve speed and reliability, 60 bus stops with low boardings will be eliminated along the Route 63 corridor. In addition, several stops will be relocated to the farside of signalized intersections and six new shelters will be installed.
- Route 54 will begin serving a new transit center at Terminal 1. Since April, Route 54 customers traveling to the airport have been transferring to the Blue Line due to construction.
- Routes 7 and 68 will be extended to provide customers better access to services.

The next scheduled changes take effect on Saturday, Dec. 5.

In challenging times, our budget must represent our priorities

From General Manager Wes Kooistra

Even under normal circumstances, our annual budgeting process must consider risks and uncertainties.



Our largest source of operating revenue, a tax on vehicle purchases, is notoriously hard to predict. Efforts to create more dedicated transit funding have fallen short, leading us to rely on one-time state funds for ongoing operating costs.

While continuing to cope with these issues, we must now confront the unprecedented disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. As is true for many businesses and organizations, the pandemic's many uncertainties increase the risks of what we know today.

A preliminary 2021 operating budget shared with Metropolitan Council Members this week recognizes and accounts for the challenges we are facing, including:

- Proceeds from the state's Motor Vehicle Sales Tax (MVST) that are well short of earlier expectations;
- An expected drop in fare revenues, as 2020 and 2021 ridership falls below half the annual totals we've seen in recent years;
- Increased costs related to cleaning and other pandemic-related safety measures.

As we manage these challenges, we have three objectives that rise above the others:

- Providing service that protects the health and safety of our riders and employees;
- Providing essential services to people who rely on transit to get to work and address their personal needs;
- Keeping our staff employed.

Meeting these objectives will be very difficult as it is, but without the federal CARES Act funding, this would be impossible. Through 2021, fare and MVST revenues are projected to decline

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by more than \$240 million across the Council's transportation services, including Metro Transit, Metro Mobility, Transit Link, and contracted bus services. In addition to the lost revenue, we must account for new COVID-driven expenses, such as rigorous cleaning and disinfecting and added trips to maintain social distancing.

The Council's allocation of \$214 million in one-time federal funds is critical to our 2020 and 2021 budgets, but it is not enough to cover our expected revenue losses and added expenses. To close the gap, we are tapping available reserves, reducing service plans to 80% of pre-COVID levels and cutting administrative expenses. We need to watch every dollar.

Our budgets represent our priorities. This should be most evident when we are most challenged. In June, I directed staff to begin developing an equity analysis for our operating budget and Capital Improvement Program (CIP), one of several initial equity actions steps.

Metro Transit has considered equity in its budgeting before, but we will be more deliberate and intentional in our approach moving forward. As we begin this work, we are examining the ways that:

- Service funded in the preliminary 2021 budget can meet the needs of riders who rely on transit the most;
- Existing programs that contribute to more accessible and equitable transit can be improved, such as Better Bus Stops and the Transit Assistance Program;
- Organizational practices critical to advancing equity are supported, including public engagement, workforce equity efforts and purchasing from or contracting with traditionally disadvantaged businesses.

The budget presented to the Council is a preliminary budget. We will continue to review our spending plans against our priorities, learn more about the the pandemic's impact on our revenue streams and hear from the public. Changes will continue to be considered until the Council adopts the final 2021 budget this December.

We are learning as we go. I want to thank each of you who are participating in the development of a budget that will successfully meet our objectives. Thanks also to those who continue to be supportive and patient as we work through this critical process. While I will not underestimate the challenges, I will continue to be confident that we can meet these challenges in a way that supports the needs of our communities, riders and employees.

CUSTOMERS TELL US HOW WE'RE DOING

"I miss him!"

Nicollet Operator **Terrence Boyce**, recently received the following commendation from a customer who appreciated the way he supported ADA customers.

"I'd like to let my bus driver know I miss him! Although my classes and job are both remote now, and I won't be on campus in the fall, I appreciated how he would always make sure I was able to get to my seat before pulling away, and that he would align the bus with the ADA pad so nobody had to walk through a snowdrift to board. I have an invisible disability, so I really relied on the Route 6 to get to class in the winter when I didn't feel safe walking that far. He was also friendly and would wish us all a good morning as we boarded."

- U of M student

In this Together: Robin Gerdesmeier

Across the organization, Metro Transit employees' work has been changed by the COVID-19 pandemic. These "In This Together" Q&As illustrate how employees are adapting both on and off the clock.



Robin Gerdesmeier, Dispatcher

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

When the pandemic began, dispatchers were swamped due to calls from operators who wouldn't be coming in for their shift. With lots of vacant shifts, I worked hard to fill them so our customers who need transit weren't left stranded.

Once the service reductions came, finding operators to fill trips became less of an issue and that part of my job returned to a bit of normalcy. Now, I spend more time trying to set my operators up for success by making sure they have all the disinfectant they need to wipe down their workstation and farebox before pulling out.

What's it like working through a pandemic?

Even though these are unprecedented times, I always make sure to come in with a positive attitude, not just for myself, but for the people around me who are still working. We continue to wash our hands, wear masks, and socially distance ourselves to help lower the chances of spreading the virus.

There are 350 operators here at East Metro, and I know almost all of them by name and employee number. They're like family to me, and I hope no one gets it. I'll keep coming into work to do my job, and do what I can to help slow the spread.

How has your life changed outside of work?

Like everyone else, I wear a mask and wash my hands often when I go out in public. But I go out less than I used to, have stopped clearance hunting inside stores and only rarely see my 75-year-old parents, always outside and at a distance. We try to keep in touch with video chat, but I wouldn't call that seeing my mom – she usually has the camera pointed at her forehead!



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