

INSIGHTS

Metro Transit's weekly employee newsletter

October 15, 2021



"It means everything": Operator Melanie Benson celebrates 45 years of service

When Operator Melanie Benson pulled up to the bus stop on Lagoon Avenue Monday morning, as she's done hundreds of times over the years, a few familiar faces were there to greet her.

There was also a plaque to be presented, commemorating Benson's 45 years of service at Metro Transit – many of them on Route 23, where she's on a first-name basis with many regular riders.

Benson's career began on Oct. 11, 1976, soon after graduating from Macalester College and having an "epiphany" while waiting for a bus.

"It's happy and jolly and wonderful," Benson said after a round of hugs with managers from Nicollet Garage, where she works. "I love this job and I've appreciated everyone I've met. It means everything."

Benson is Metro Transit's longest-serving bus operator, and the agency's seventh-longest serving active employee. Each career milestone has brought a bit of celebration – on Monday, her bus was decorated with balloons and posters, and several familiar customers tagged along to wish Benson well.

That joyful energy, Benson, said, is why she's not giving much thought to life after Metro Transit. "We don't use the 'r word' around me," Benson said. "As long as I'm enjoying myself, I'm staying on the job. And I'm certainly enjoying myself."

Ridership at its highest point since the start of the pandemic

Ridership reached its highest point since the start of the pandemic in September, topping 123,000 average weekday rides.

The increase of about 25% from August's average weekday ridership was largely driven by the resumption of in-person classes at area high schools and colleges. All regular adult fares were also reduced to \$1, along with other fare promotions.

Compared to last September, total monthly rides last month increased by about two-thirds on light rail, about one-third on bus routes and more than doubled on Northstar.

Through the end of September, nearly 23.5 million rides have been provided. Ridership has increased each of the past six months but remains about half of what it was before the pandemic began.

Clear definition will help us create a more equitable future

From Celina Martina, Senior Manager, Equity & Inclusion

I've had a lot of encouraging conversations since I joined Metro Transit in July.



Clearly, many of us have a good grasp of what equity means and a sincere desire to address the troubling disparities we see in our region. Discussions we're having about race, gender and abilities are also making us a more inclusive service provider and employer.

With an understanding and an interest, we are now being called to evolve into an organization where equity is not just a concept we know and support but a building block of all the work we're doing to reach the goals identified in our Strategic Plan.

Indeed, equity is seen as so central to our work that it is called out as one of the Strategic Plan's Core Elements, alongside innovation, stewardship, and engagement.

To help us on our path, the Equity & Inclusion Team will spend the next several weeks asking employees what they believe transit equity should mean to Metro Transit. These conversations will result in a new definition of transit equity that will be presented later this year.

You may be asking yourself why we're asking for help defining transit equity or why, after many years of talking about equity, Metro Transit doesn't already have such a definition in place.

The answer to both questions is that, while we've taken the time to learn what equity is, we have a less complete understanding of how to embed it in our work. In many ways, we are still coming to terms with what we're trying to address, how we can best address it, and how to know if what we're doing is having its intended effect.

Our new definition will help clarify our role and create the path on which we'll walk in the coming years.

To be clear, there are many good examples of equity shaping our work to be proud of.

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The Better Bus Stops program is perhaps one of the clearest and best examples we have. Over the past several years, and with community input and support, we have deliberately funded shelter improvements in areas of concentrated poverty that hadn't seen as much past investment.

Today, because of that ongoing work, race and income do not determine whether you'll have access to a bus stop with a shelter.

Equity is also informing our service changes, plans to expand our Bus Rapid Transit network, hiring practices and workforce development initiatives.

The efforts we're making are chipping away at the inequities we see in our region and in our workplace.

But they are also a reminder of the many steps that will need to be taken on our long, shared path to dismantling the systems that made this work necessary in the first place.

Having a shared definition for transit equity – one that can and should evolve as time passes – as well as clear goals and strategies is incredibly important to sustaining this work over time.

Thank you for participating in this important conversation and the important work that lies ahead.

How to provide feedback

To help the Equity & Inclusion Team define transit equity, email celina.martina@metrotransit.org or contact any member of the Equity & Inclusion Team. Several upcoming in-person and virtual outreach events have also been scheduled. To learn more about upcoming events, email sarah.berres@metrotransit.org.

I-35W & Lake Street Station opening Monday, Oct. 18

After decades of visioning and community input, the I-35W & Lake Street Station will open to the public on Monday, Oct. 18.

The two-level station, in the center of I-35W, will be served by several local and express routes and, starting Saturday, Dec. 4, by the METRO Orange Line.

The station includes heated and enclosed waiting areas, real-time signs, and elevators that, for the first time, make the freeway level stops accessible to all users. Previously, customers had to use a crumbling set of stairs and waited on the side of the interstate to board buses at the freeway level.

The indoor spaces at the station will be open from 5 a.m. to 11:45 p.m. on weekdays. These spaces will be open on weekends when the Orange Line opens.

CUSTOMERS TELL US HOW WE'RE DOING

"Calm, patient, and respectful..."

Heywood Operator **Anthony David** recently received a commendation from a customer for how they handled a difficult situation.

The bus was nearly full with a handful of difficult passengers. The driver was extremely calm, patient, and respectful in lowering the level of agitation. Conditions that could have become volatile didn't because of the driver's demeanor. I would like him and Metro Transit to know that his efforts didn't go unnoticed or unappreciated.

Sydney L.

The station's opening will be celebrated on Monday morning by representatives from the Metropolitan Council, Minnesota Department of Transportation and City of Minneapolis.

METRO B Line plan approved

As the finishing touches were being put on the I-35W & Lake Street Station, plans for a new Bus Rapid Transit line on Lake Street were also approved by the Metropolitan Council.

The Council on Wednesday approved plans to build 33 new BRT stations on the METRO B Line, which will substantially replace Route 21 and operate on Lake Street and Marshall and Selby avenues. The B Line will serve the I-35W & Lake Street Station.

Construction on the B Line is scheduled to begin in 2023, and the line is scheduled to open in 2024.

Light rail schedule changing to improve reliability

To improve reliability, light rail trips will operate every 12 minutes during the day starting Saturday, Oct. 23. Trains operate every 10 minutes under the current schedule.

The schedule is being changed to address an operator shortage. There are more than 100 train operators, with several more in training, but retirements and transfers have made it harder to fill trips when an operator is unexpectedly absent.

Starting October 23, Green Line and Blue Line trains will operate every 12 minutes between 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. on weekdays, and from about 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. on weekends. Trains run less frequently in the evening and early morning.

Bus operators who are interested in transferring to light rail are invited to apply to become a train operator through Friday, Oct. 22. Operators who pass agility testing and an interview will go on an eligibility list according to seniority. Individuals on the eligibility list will be trained as positions open.

An ongoing bus operator shortage is also leading to unplanned trip cancellations. Improving the reliability of bus service will be taken into consideration when quarterly service adjustments take effect on Saturday, Dec. 4.



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