

INSIGHTS

Metro Transit's weekly employee newsletter

December 29, 2023



On Wednesday, Dec. 20, Bus Operator Finley Brees had an unusual passenger board his Route 64 bus at Burr Street and Minnehaha Avenue – a poodle named Milo.

"I stopped and let someone off and then this dog jumped onboard," Brees said. He was happy to have the dog onboard until they could find a safe place for him. He was worried that Milo might get hit by another vehicle. Thankfully, Milo's pet parents reached out to Customer Service, and within an hour of being picked up, Officer **Brandon Colvin** was able to escort Milo back home in his squad car.

Tom Vang retires with 34 years of service

In 1979, a teenaged Tom Vang immigrated from Laos to Minnesota with his father to be close to family and to find opportunities. About a decade later, he found opportunity at Metro Transit.

"I was working as a teacher and working part time at Metro Transit," Vang said. "After a few years of doing both, I realized the pay and benefits were better being a bus driver."

Like many college graduates, Vang discovered a great career that wasn't a title printed on their degree. His degree and experience in education did prove helpful in his newfound career as a classroom filled with students and a busload of passengers share a lot in common.

"I work with people," he said. "And when you work with people, you work with difficult ones sometimes."

When he began, operators made \$8 an hour, buses were red and had no power steering nor air conditioning, Snelling Garage still existed and Ruter was called Shingle Creek. Today, as he leaves Metro Transit with all the modern advancements and amenities operators enjoy, Vang realizes that his three decades go by quicker than most realize.

"Metro Transit is a place to meet lots of different people onboard and in the garage," Vang said. "The time here goes by fast."

In retirement, Vang plans to travel to Europe and South America. And, when he's not traveling, he'll tend to his 7-acre hobby farm with sweet corn, mustard greens, and a host of other plants. Celebrate with Tom at 1 p.m. on Friday, Jan. 12 at East Metro Garage.



A look back at 2023: Celebrating our collective achievements

From General Manager
Lesley Kandaras



As we reflect on 2023, we have many reasons to feel proud of our work this year and excited about what we can accomplish together in 2024.

We delivered about 15 percent more rides in 2023 than in 2022. We increased service, thereby providing more options for people we serve.

Within our organization, we practiced applying the Equity Considerations Tool to our decisions and continued strengthening our organizational culture through the Great Workplace Project. And in partnership with Human Resources, we hired hundreds of new operators.

We also made significant strides addressing public safety concerns on transit. While we still have much work ahead of us to ensure we are always delivering a safe, welcoming experience for all customers and employees, it's worth noting that Metro Transit recorded a decrease in crime in the second and third quarters of 2023, compared to the first quarter of this year. In 2023, we implemented new approaches to public safety by expanding the layers of official presence on our system to complement the tireless efforts of Metro Transit police officers. This includes adding supplemental security officers at several facilities, community-based organizations riding light rail and connecting people to social services, and Community Service Officers who are now inspecting fares and issuing citations for non-payment.

Additionally, in 2023, the state legislature established a new transportation-dedicated sales tax for the seven-county metro region. A portion of this new sales tax revenue will help fund transit operations and maintenance. Unlike many transit agencies across the country facing budget shortfalls as they run out of federal COVID relief funds, our region's

continued on next page

sales tax will provide Metro Transit with more funding certainty than we previously could rely on. This means we are in the fortunate position of being able to plan years into the future and thinking more boldly about how we can best serve our region. As part of this change, this fall, we kicked off Metro Transit Forward, our effort to co-create a strategic vision that will help guide our work into the future.

I recognize that these examples barely scratch the surface of all that was accomplished in 2023. Below are reflections on this year from leaders across Metro Transit. The list is truly impressive and exemplifies your daily commitment and dedication to the communities we serve.

Thank you for all you do. I am excited for our shared work ahead in 2024!

Brian Funk, Chief Operating Officer

2023 was another year of change, increased ridership, and more service across Operations. As Lesley stated, ridership saw a 15 percent increase across all modes, and thanks to the fantastic efforts to hire and retain more operators, bus service increased nearly 10 percent from the start of the year. In October, daily Northstar service doubled, and we jumped back into serving Twins Playoffs and Vikings games. Event ridership continued to climb, and our ability to deliver exceptional service was never more apparent than when we rallied around the Taylor Swift and Beyonce mega-concerts.

Beyond service, Operations saw a few internal changes in 2023 as well. The Engineering & Facilities and Asset Management teams joined Operations in May, and two new Deputy Chief Operating Officers joined the team in September. These staffing changes paired with the new sales tax funding has paved the way for increased investments in clean, updated facilities and equipment, efforts that will continue throughout 2024.

As we look to the new year, I look forward to adding more members to the team, improving job satisfaction and employee retention, and for additional opportunities to partner across the agency to improve our commitment to deliver safe and reliable service to the region.

Police Chief Ernest Morales III

In 2023, the Metro Transit Police Department (MTPD) welcomed me with open arms as their ninth Chief of Police, and we got right to work. I heard from customers and staff about the issues facing our system and listened as they asked for more of a uniformed presence. We implemented new approaches to public safety, including:

CUSTOMERS TELL US HOW WE'RE DOING

"Upbeat and positive"

Nicollet Garage operator **Chantal Burnett** recently received a commendation for their customer service.

My driver today was so friendly and helpful. They greeted everyone on the bus. When I got on, I told them I was going to Knollwood and that I hadn't been there before. The driver asked me what store I was going to and that they would tell me where I needed to get off the bus. When I was getting off, they told me where to wait for my return trip. They were so upbeat and positive. It was really nice to see, and it changed the mood for everyone on the bus!

- A call for uniformed officers to ride the system between calls for service, and instruction to make positive eye contact with commuters during this time.
- The addition of new layers of presence on our system, including deploying supplemental security officers at key locations and training Community Service Officers (CSOs) to inspect fares and issue citations. MTPD's Homeless Action Team led the launch of the Transit Service Intervention Project, which is expanding outreach to people riding on light rail who may be in need to connections to shelter, housing, or treatment.

These combined efforts instilled a new sense of pride for the men and woman in the MTPD. Every day we have positive interactions with our commuters and people in need, providing them the services they seek in hopes of recovery from substance addiction and homelessness. As we look to 2024, MTPD will continue these efforts, providing service to our riders in a respectable, empathetic, and professional manner.

Continue reading leadership highlights in the email version of Insights.

Briefly: This week's news and notes

NYE Miller Free Rides & Vikings: Starting at 6 p.m. On Sunday, Dec. 31, all rides are free until the end of service as part of the Miller Free Rides program. This includes Northstar commuter rail, all buses, and light rail. It also includes all Minnesota Valley Transit Authority vehicles. Vikings fans riding Northstar on New Years Eve are only responsible for one-way fare for the 7:20 p.m. game. Their return trip is free. For more information, speak to your manager.

Employee Town Halls continue in 2024: Join the next Employee Town Hall virtually or in-person at North Loop Garage, room 104 at 11 a.m. on Wednesday, Jan. 10. The event will kick-off a series of in-person only town halls at each facility. For more information on Town Halls, visit the Employee Town Hall MetNet site or contact **Lindsey Geyer** at lindsey.geyer@metrotransit.org.

WTS fireside chat: Metro Transit and WTS Minnesota are hosting a fireside chat with General Manager **Lesley Kandaras** on Thursday, which includes all Metro Transit employees. Register for the event here. For more information about WTS, email **Carrie Desmond** at carrie.desmond@metrotransit.org.



The Insights newsletter is published weekly. For more information, visit Insights on MetNet. A link can be found on the homepage. Feedback and story ideas can be sent to insights@metrotransit.org.