



Off the rails: Here are three ways to look at the Twin Cities' proposed rail line

By Eric Boehm
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For a cool \$1.7 billion, the Twin Cities could have a third light rail operating by 2018. The so-called Southwest LRT would actually be a 15-mile extension of the Green Line light rail that opened earlier this summer.

The current line runs from downtown St. Paul to downtown Minneapolis, but the next plan is to extend to line from Minneapolis to Eden Prairie through several of the Twin Cities' wealthier suburbs in the southwest part of the metro region.



SOUTHWEST LRT: The proposed light rail would cost \$1.7 billion – but how much is that really? (Source: Metropolitan Council)

The first light rail line, the Blue Line, opened in 2004 and connects Minneapolis with the airport and the Mall of America in Bloomington.

City officials are pitching the Southwest LRT as only the first of several future light rail projects that will combine with extensions of high-speed bus lines to connect the Twin Cities to all the surrounding suburbs.

The part of the metro area served by the proposed line is projected to add 30,000 households and 60,000 jobs by 2030, according to the Metropolitan Council, the regional planning board that is pushing the light rail line.

“I know we can do this together for the good of the region. We must,” said council chairwoman Sue Haigh in a statement earlier this summer.

But the extension of the Green Line is a costly undertaking that should raise plenty of questions, says Randall O’Toole, a senior fellow for the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, D.C.

After studying the plans for the new light rail line in the Twin Cities, O’Toole told Watchdog Radio this week that cities favor expensive rail projects over cheaper bus lines — that can move the same number of people over the same distance — for a few reasons.

“There is this fascination for rail; and I think it’s partly out of nostalgia and partly because the federal government will pay half or more of all the rail cost,” he said. “So cities are competing to find the most expensive transit they can in order to get more money out of the federal government.”

But whether it’s a vital project to support a growing part of the metro area or a taxpayer-funded boondoggle waiting to happen, there’s no doubt that \$1.7 billion is a lot of money. In fact, numbers that large are difficult, if not impossible, for the human mind to comprehend. So how much does this 15-mile stretch of light rail actually cost? Here’s three ways to help visualize it.

1. \$1.7 billion in terms of city buses and iPads At present, the Twin Cities regional transit authority, Metro Transit, owns and operates about 880 buses in the two cities and the surrounding suburbs. A brand new city bus can cost anywhere from about \$350,000 to \$750,000 — but if we use a median figure of \$500,000 per new bus, the city could place its entire fleet of buses for \$440 million. That leaves a whopping \$1.26 billion on the table, so we’ll have to get more creative about how we spend money. Roughly 850,000 students are enrolled in public schools across the state of Minnesota. The newest model of iPad costs about \$500.

That means it would cost \$425 million to buy a brand new iPad for every single public school student in the state of Minnesota — without any discount for buying in bulk. In other words, the Twin Cities could replace their entire bus fleet and every student in Minnesota public schools could get an iPad for a combined total of \$865 million — or just about half of the cost of the 15-mile light rail extension. Then, they could do it all over again. That’s right — replace every bus in the Twin Cities’ fleet a second time and buy every student a second iPad, and after that exercise in fiscal profligacy, the final total would be \$1.73 billion. A mere \$30 million over budget; pretty good for government work.

2. **\$1.7 billion in terms of new cars** The new light rail line might be worth more than iPads and buses. After all, it's providing a brand new method of public transportation and giving a way for the residents of Eden Prairie to get to downtown Minneapolis without needing to sit in their greenhouse gas-emitting cars for an hour each day.

There's some evidence light rail doesn't actually reduce greenhouse gas emissions, but even if it was an effective way of saving the planet, would it be worth the cost?

Instead, the Twin Cities could offer to buy every resident of Eden Prairie a brand new Toyota Prius, which would do more to reduce carbon emissions because they would be able to use the cars for every trip around the region instead of only when they are heading downtown. And how much would it cost to buy a new Prius for all 62,600 residents of the suburban town? At an estimated retail price of \$25,000 per vehicle, the final bill would be only \$1.56 billion. That leaves \$140 million leftover — enough money to run the Eden Prairie School District for the entire 2014-15 school year. That's a free year of school and a new electric car for every resident — every man, woman and child gets a car — all for the cost of the proposed light rail line.

3. **\$1.7 billion in terms of the people who will ride the light rail** The Metropolitan Council estimates 30,000 people will ride the new light rail line on a daily basis. So how long would it take for the line to reach 1.7 billion riders?

This isn't a question of cost versus benefits, as in the first two examples, but rather an illustration of just how mind-blowing 1.7 billion of something actually is.

If the light rail line does indeed get 30,000 riders per day, it would attract 10.9 million riders in a single year. Not too shabby. In 10 years, it would have 109 million riders. In the 30-year lifespan of the rails used for the commuter trains, it would get 328.5 million riders.

But it would take 155 years — or 56,666 days — for 1.7 billion riders to use the new light rail line. By then it would be the year 2173, and surely we'll all finally have flying cars.