

Dakota County to Study New Transit Options

By: Janice Bitters, Finance & Commerce, February 16, 2016 4:01 pm

Public officials and business leaders think Dakota County has a transit gap that's hindering employers and their workers. But the county aims to support a study to identify new transportation opportunities in the area to help fill that gap.

The county put out a request for proposals last month for consultants who could conduct the study, which will help transit planners focus on new east-to-west connections in Dakota County. Currently, most bus routes in the county travel north to south, carrying passengers to and from Minneapolis and St. Paul.

"Transit in the metro region is pretty 'hub-and-spoke' we call it, where everything kind of goes into the core," said Jane Kansier, interim executive director for the Minnesota Valley Transit Authority. "There's been more and more demand ... for services that don't follow that traditional model."

The study comes on the heels of another suburb-to-suburb transit experiment, which rolled out Jan. 19. The 494 Route, which travels from Marschall Road Transit Station in Shakopee to Station 73 at highway 55 and County Road 73 in Plymouth, is a demonstration project funded by \$2 million over two years from the Minnesota Legislature.

So far, ridership has been low on the route, said Len Simich, chief executive officer at Southwest Transit, one of the four agencies behind the demonstration project.

The line is aimed at boosting access to employment and commercial hubs along Highway 169 and Interstate 494, but the transit agencies behind the project will meet on Wednesday, Feb. 17, to discuss the route and whether it should be adjusted to attract more riders.

But the demand for suburb-to-suburb routes in Dakota County has the potential to be high. According to U.S. census data from 2013 — the most recent year available — nearly half of Dakota County workers also live in the county.

The lack of east-to-west connections means that residents and nonresidents commuting to jobs in the county don't always have the option to choose transit, said Vicki Stute, president of the Dakota County Regional Chamber of Commerce, who also serves on the Dakota-Scott Workforce Investment Board.

Current transit options often don't, "take [employees] all the way to the door of the employer, or to a place that they can then pick up a secondary transit option to get them through that last leg," she said.

Dakota County has several transit stations and park-and-rides, including stops in Burnsville, Eagan, Lakeville and Apple Valley.

But after talking with employers around the county, Stute said the No. 1 challenge employers consistently point to is a labor shortage, and transit options play a role in that challenge.

“We also have a large retail base in Dakota County, and those workers are needed on nights and weekends, but there’s even greater limitation in terms of the public transportation options [then],” she said.

The Red Line, a bus rapid transit route that runs from the Apple Valley Transit Station to the Mall of America, is an asset to Dakota County transit riders, Stute said. But the line, “only goes so far and it doesn’t go east to west,” she noted.

The coming study, which will take place over the next year, will offer a broad look at the corridors in the county and which ones would benefit from new transit options. The study may also reach slightly outside of the county, if it means connecting transit riders to important destinations, said Joseph Morneau, senior transit planner for the county.

Dakota County cities, along with the MVTA and Metro Transit, will be tied into the study process through advisory and technical committees, Morneau said. The agencies will also host public outreach sessions.

As of Feb. 16, Dakota County has received one response to its RFP. The deadline to submit is Feb. 17, but bids are often received last-minute, so Morneau said he’s optimistic the agency will receive additional responses before the due date passes.