

**United States Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs
Housing, Transportation, and Community Development Subcommittee
Field Hearing: “Examining Minnesota’s Transit Priorities”**

**Written Testimony of Charles A. Zelle, Metropolitan Council Chair
August 24, 2021**

Chair Smith – Good morning. I’m Charlie Zelle, the Chair of the Metropolitan Council. Thank you for inviting me to testify today.

I want to welcome you, FTA Administrator Fernandez, and other distinguished guests to Metro Transit.

The Metropolitan Council is the policy-making body, planning agency, and provider of essential services for the seven-county Twin Cities region. The Metropolitan Council is the Metropolitan Planning Organization for our region, and we plan for and operate transit and paratransit. Metro Transit is a division of the Metropolitan Council and is the largest public transit provider in Minnesota.

Transit is essential to our region. Investing in transit builds community prosperity, improves our quality of life, connects people to opportunity, and plays a critical role in advancing equity and addressing climate change. Embedded in our practices is the belief that inclusive contracting creates opportunity by growing small businesses and jobs.

Like transit agencies across the country, Metro Transit’s ridership is significantly down due to the pandemic. But the drop in ridership doesn’t tell the full story. Even now, Metro Transit provides nearly 100,000 rides each weekday. The pandemic highlighted how indispensable transit service is to essential workers and to others who rely on transit to meet their daily needs.

I want to thank Senator Smith and our federal delegation for appropriating federal COVID relief funding for transit through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act, the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, and the American Rescue Plan Act. And thank you to the Federal Transit Administration for their tremendous work in distributing these funds.

In total, our region has received over \$725 million to support transit operations during the pandemic. These funds are keeping essential transit services on the street and over 3,000 Metro Transit workers employed.

We believe successfully emerging from the pandemic requires us to continue investing in our region’s transit network. Our experience shows that investing in fast, frequent, reliable, and safe service increases ridership and strengthens the role transit plays in our communities.

The map on the screen illustrates this vision. This map represents our planned 2030 network of light rail and bus rapid transit lines.

With the help of our federal partners, we are making significant progress on each of these corridors. I’ll provide a quick update on them.

Beginning with the Orange Line bus rapid transit corridor, we are completing construction, and we anticipate opening for service later this year. This line runs along I-35W. The project received a \$74 million Small Starts grant in 2019 and an additional \$11 million ARPA grant in June.

Continuing clockwise, the Green Line Extension, or Southwest LRT is under construction. This is the largest infrastructure project in state history, and work continues throughout the corridor. Just through June 2021, our Southwest contracting efforts have resulted in spend to Disadvantaged Business Enterprises (DBE) of \$155,277,877 in construction services and professional services with 100 DBE contracts and 86 unique DBEs.

The Blue Line Extension light rail project is undergoing an alignment review. We are exploring new ways to better connect the north side of Minneapolis and northern communities to the line and are conducting an extensive public engagement process on a modified alignment. When completed, the Blue Line extension will serve chronically underserved communities and help ensure the benefits of transit are available to neighborhoods that have been passed by for too long.

Moving to the right side of the map, the Purple Line dedicated guideway BRT project anticipates an environmental decision from FTA in the next two months, and the Council will seek entry to New Starts Project Development this fall.

The Gold Line project is a dedicated guideway BRT corridor running east from Saint Paul. We are so pleased the President's 2022 budget recommendation included \$100 million for this project. Design work is completed, and the FTA will conduct a review of the project's readiness for a Full Funding Grant next week. We're eager to move toward the Full Funding Grant Agreement in the next year and start construction next summer.

The Riverview project is beginning environmental analysis as a rail corridor that will advance in the future, connecting downtown Saint Paul with the airport and Mall of America.

Connecting all these lines are our arterial bus rapid transit corridors represented in letters. These have been successful upgrades to local bus services that have seen significant ridership growth. Half of our bus system rides are on corridors planned for arterial BRT. We have two operating arterial BRT lines, A Line and C Line. The D Line is under construction and the B and E Lines are fully funded and moving toward construction.

When our full 2040 network is constructed, LRT and BRT services will connect 28 percent of the region's residents and 44 percent of all jobs in the region. This network will serve 46 percent of the region's BIPOC residents and 60 percent of the region's renter households.

This kind of access to opportunity with high quality and affordable transit service is a central focus of our plan to reduce regional racial disparities. We understand the benefits these transformational investments provide. We're also fully aware it takes a concentrated effort with our local, regional, statewide, and federal partners to keep our residents and businesses thriving during project development and construction. The Council is committed to producing tangible results in the area of anti-displacement and seeking opportunities to heal our communities from past injustices. The Council and Hennepin County are partnering with community members and agency stakeholders to convene a diverse Anti-Displacement Working Group to bring attention to these very issues as part of our Blue Line LRT Extension work. The Anti-Displacement Working Group will develop implementable recommendations to prevent multiple forms of displacement and promote equitable development, during the construction phase of the project and beyond.

As we expand our network, we are taking intentional steps to increase the diversity of contractors building our transit projects. This includes depositing funds with financial institutions committed to fostering

entrepreneurship for people of color and women business owners, supporting on-the-job training that exposes more people to careers in construction, and connecting firms through our Mentoring Protégé program, which increases opportunities for subcontracting and prime awards.

Looking ahead, we are watching the infrastructure bill that passed the Senate. If the bill becomes law, it will be a historic investment in transportation for our region and for the nation. For one example, the bill's focus on transitioning to zero emissions transit fleets aligns with our commitment to expand our electric bus program. Metro Transit has made significant investments in battery electric buses and infrastructure, in large part thanks to the FTA's Low or No Emissions Program grants. The Senate-passed infrastructure bill would further support our transition to a zero-emissions future.

In closing, thank you for this opportunity to share our progress and our vision towards building a strong transit network – a system that provides people across our region with more high-quality options to get where they need to go. We appreciate all the support we receive from our federal partners. You truly are essential to our current and future success.