

## Southwest Minneapolis' Transit Route Selection Process May Rule Out Light Rail to Uptown

By Yonah Freemark • August 11, 2009

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The most advantageous route isn't the cheapest, and the federal cost-effectiveness process may therefore prevent it from being built.

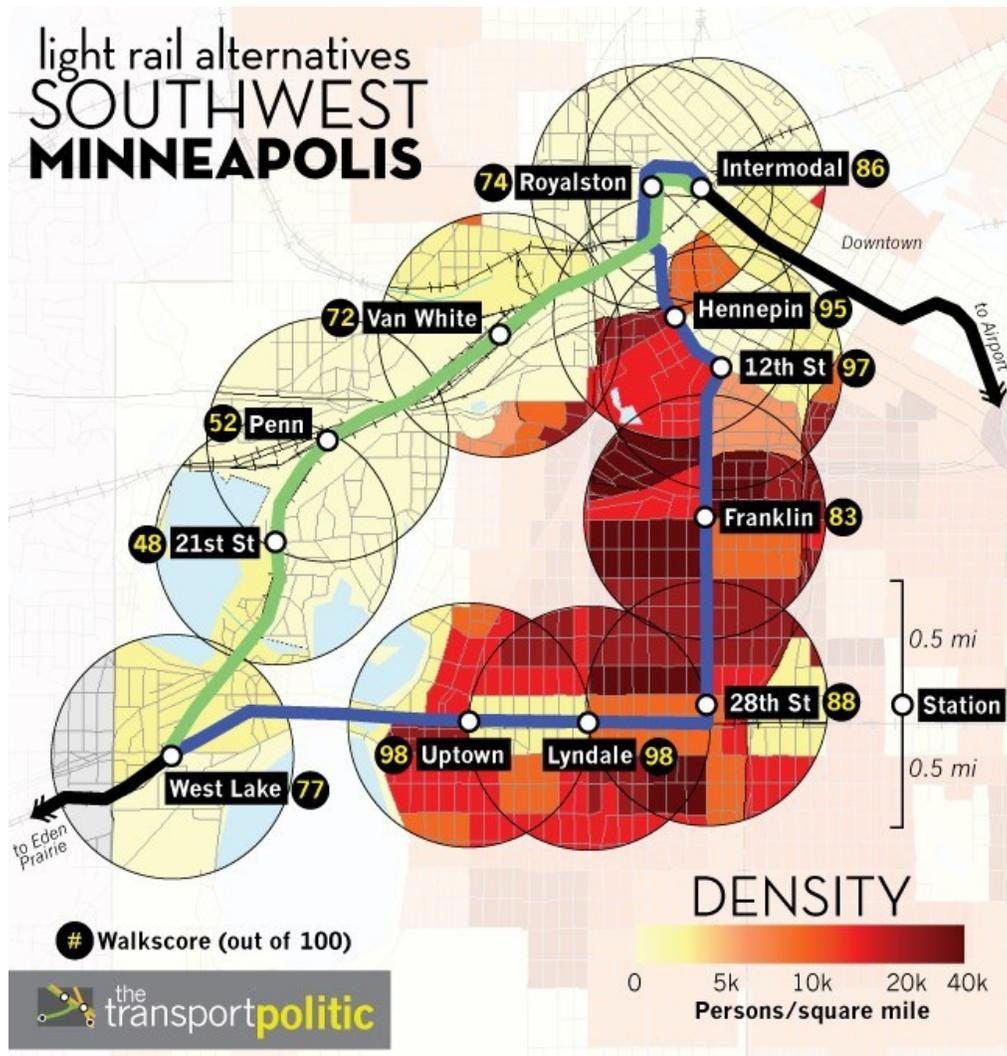
The Twin Cities' **Metro Council** regional planning authority is in the midst of evaluating route alternatives for a new transit line extending southwest from downtown Minneapolis. The **Southwest Transitway** will be the region's third light rail line after the **Hiawatha line**, which linked downtown Minneapolis and the airport in 2004, and the **Central Corridor**, which will connect downtown Minneapolis and the capital complex in St. Paul by 2014. In a series of meetings beginning today, citizens will have the chance to discuss the exact route of the Southwest line — and their input could be essential, because planners are currently angling to make the wrong decision about where trains should run. Their endorsement of a route through low-density neighborhoods in place of a more expensive line through Minneapolis' lively Uptown is symptomatic of the failure of government transportation policy in addressing the needs of inhabitants of dense inner city communities.

After years of study, Minneapolis is almost ready to submit its locally preferred alternative (LPA) corridor to the Federal Transit Administration, which will distribute up to 60% of total funds to the project through the New Starts major capital grant program. In order to receive money from Washington, Metro will have to show that the proposed route meets **national cost-effectiveness guidelines**, which are stringent enough to sieve out a large percentage of proposed new transit lines.

This requirement puts elected officials in a quandary: should they work to build the most effective transit network possible, or should they limit their ambitions for fear that the federal government will rule out any funding at all?

Effectively, this is where Minneapolis finds itself, and the region is coming dangerously close to eliminating its best route option because of cost-effectiveness concerns. Of the **three routes** being considered for the Southwest Transitway's alignment, one (#1A) has been dismissed by suburban officials because it won't serve the city of Eden Prairie as effectively as the others, even though it would be cheaper to build. Another (#3C) is too expensive because it would require a tunnel under a section of Nicollet Avenue, but it would serve the city of Minneapolis best because it would provide several stations in the dense and active Uptown district. 3C would operate on the **Midtown Greenway** parallel to Lake Street in that section of the city. The last (#3A) is the only route, according to local planners, that could meet federal cost guidelines — but its effect on the commutes of people who live in Minneapolis would be marginal. 3A would skim the side of the Kenilworth trail and lounge the edge of two lakes, running through neighborhoods of single-family housing.

All routes would operate from downtown Minneapolis to Eden Prairie, through St. Louis Park, Hopkins, and Minnetonka. The cost of the corridors ranges from less than \$1 billion for 1A to about \$1.5 billion for 3C — and operating costs would **similarly be higher** on the latter route because of its slightly longer distance. Trains could be operating by 2015 or 2017 at the latest if the FTA endorses project financing. Both 3A and 3C would be expected to attract 30,000 daily riders, 8,000 of whom would be new to transit.



In the neighborhood meetings coming up over the next month, planners **will endorse** the construction of route 3A and then listen to the concerns of community members. Elected officials on the Metro Council will decide later this year whether to follow the recommendations of the planners. Federal rules make it difficult to imagine that any decision in favor of route 3C is possible.

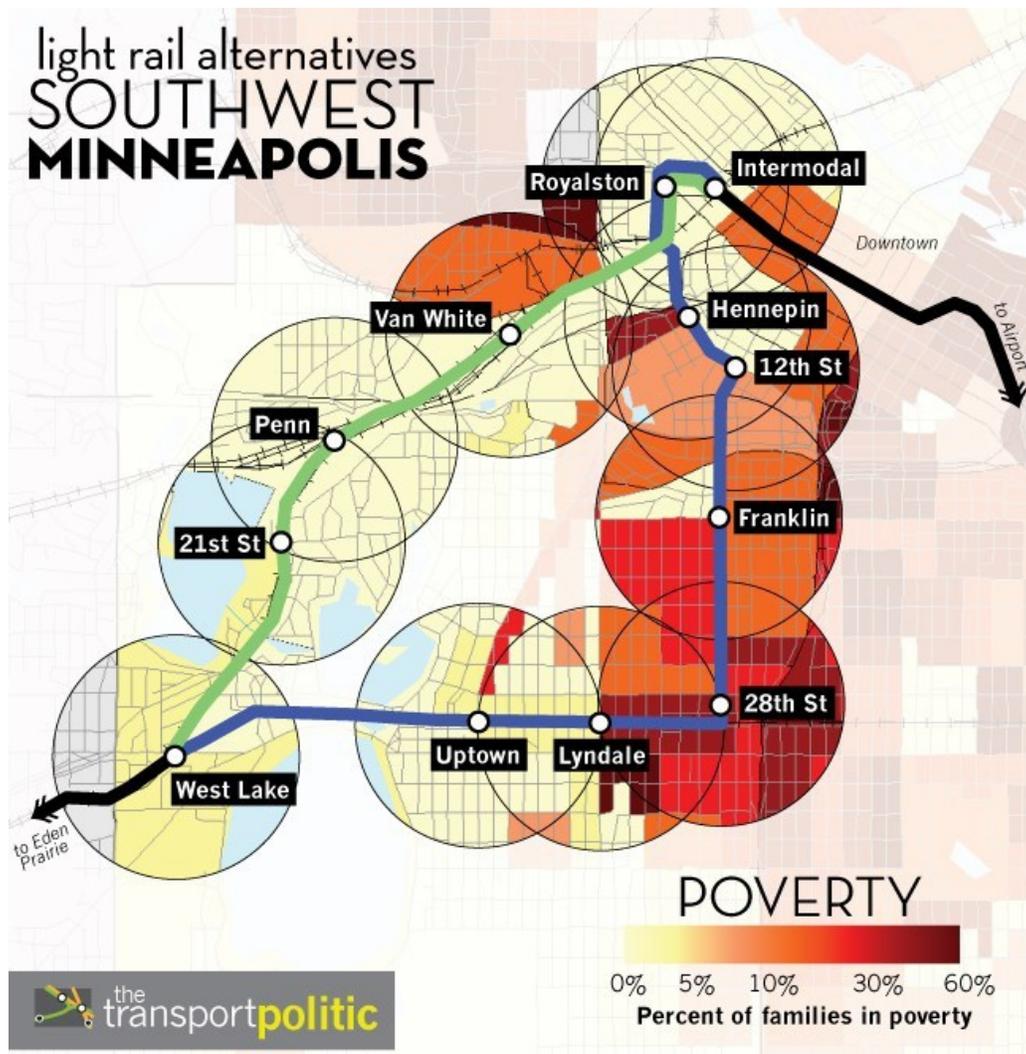
That's too bad, however, because **route 3C would be far more effective in encouraging transit use in Minneapolis.**

The map above gives a comparison of the density of the neighborhoods within a half-mile of the two principal alternatives through Minneapolis, as well as an indication of the **walk score** of the areas around the proposed stations. 3A is shown in green and 3C in blue. The Southwest Transitway would continue out of the city towards Eden Prairie (the black arrow on the map's bottom left); the existing Hiawatha Line to the airport is shown by the black arrow on the right side of the map.

As demonstrated in the above map, alternative 3C (blue) would serve areas of significantly higher density than alternative 3A. Whereas the western routing is almost uniformly low-density single family residential in use (as indicated by the low walk scores at station locations), the eastern route has a diversity of built forms, with apartment buildings interspersed with tightly packed houses. The Uptown route is already mixed-use, with hundreds of shops and restaurants within walking distance of proposed light rail stops.

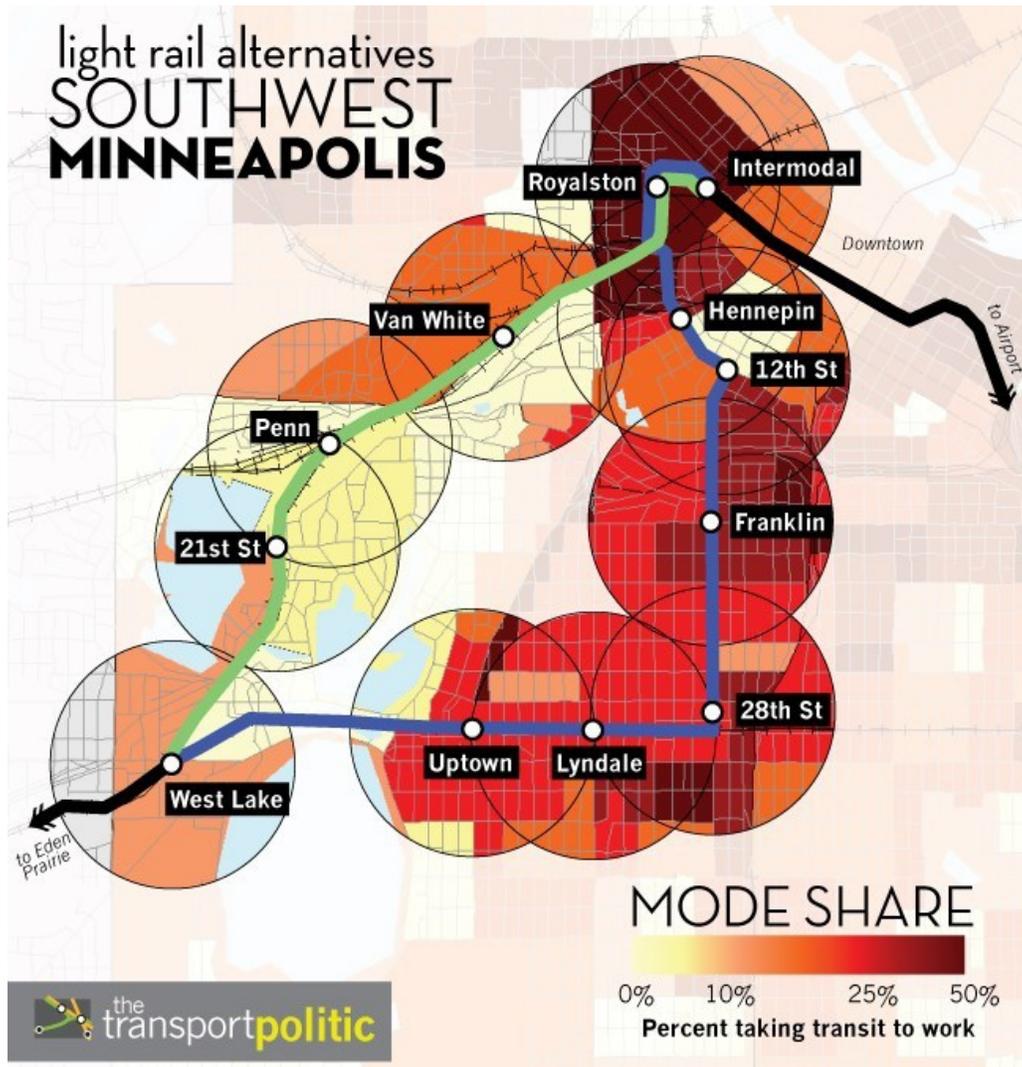
The construction of a light rail line along alignment 3C, in other words, would provide far better access downtown for a much larger percentage of the city's population than would a route along alignment 3A, encouraging infill construction. That kind of inner city investment would be virtually impossible along most of 3A's route in Minneapolis proper, since surrounding land uses are not conforming with higher densities and a diversity of uses.

Uptown is an important attraction for people in the Twin Cities, and a connection to light rail would enforce that popularity; there is little chance that the neighborhoods around 3A's proposed 21st St, Penn, and Van White stations will ever develop a similar character. **Building light rail along 3A instead of 3C is almost an invitation to drive Uptown rather than take transit there.**



The Uptown route would serve a far higher number of people in poverty. Good transit services should aim to improve the commutes of the least well-off, and the 3A route would serve few people of lower incomes in Minneapolis. 3C, meanwhile, would not only give the poor a faster trip into downtown Minneapolis but also a

quicker route to the growing Southwest suburbs, where retail and office employment opportunities are plentiful. A 3A route would require an additional transfer for the thousands of low-income people without cars who need to get to those jobs.



Unsurprisingly considering the area's density and population of impoverished people, the Uptown 3C route would also serve a far more transit-dependent population. While average transit mode share for commutes along the 3C route are between 25-50% for the Minneapolis sections of the line, they are for the most part lower than 10% along 3A. The wealth and car-dependence of the people living along route 3A makes it seem unlikely that we'll see a significant increase in transit use for them. The 3C route would make car-free living for people in Uptown and neighborhoods along Nicollet Avenue a realistic possibility.

Based on this information, can we trust the ridership estimates that suggest similar numbers of daily users for routes 3A and 3C? In Minneapolis, compared to 3A, 3C serves far more people in a more walkable environment; those people, meanwhile, are far more likely to be impoverished and transit-dependent. Outside of Minneapolis, the two routes are identical. What gives? What's wrong with Metro Council's ridership estimates?

A few explanations reveal a lot about the way the FTA calculates the value of new transit investments. FTA, after all, provides the basic rules that organizations like Metro Council use to determine the potential benefits and expected ridership of new light rail systems.

- One, the cost-benefit analysis is heavily biased towards the number of annual hours commuters will save by using the new transit system. This means that people who already have longer commutes are seen as more valuable for the FTA than those who choose to live in in-town locations with shorter distances between their residences and workplaces. As a result, transit networks are encouraged to extend out into the suburbs, rather than be densified and reinforced downtown. **This policy encourages sprawl**; though more suburbanites may find themselves taking transit to work, they won't be using it to go shopping or out on the weekend. European policies, which generally encourage densification of transit networks in dense, inner-city locations, have produced transit systems that are far better-used per mile compared to American lines.
- Two, similarly, the FTA likes speed. As a result, the slightly shorter 3A route is better for commuters in the far-out suburbs hoping to get to jobs downtown. The tunnel planned for route 3C, which ramps up costs exponentially, is only necessary because a surface route would be too slow and make the commutes of people from Eden Prairie slightly longer. Note that a 3C route without the tunnel would have a significantly lower construction cost, but it still wouldn't meet FTA cost-effectiveness criteria because fewer outer-suburban people would ride it because their trip would be longer.
- Three, the formula used by the FTA prefers new riders to old ones. In other words, a person moving from a car to a train is considered more important than a person moving from a bus to a train. **This means that people already using transit are disadvantaged and are unlikely to receive upgrades to their transit service.** Circuitously, the fact that fewer people use transit in the areas along route 3A (because of their wealth, car-dependence, and sprawling neighborhoods) means that they're more likely to be considered for funding by the federal government.

**These three structural problems make the 3A route the defacto choice for Metro Council decision makers, even though it is quite clearly inferior to the 3C route in terms of its benefits for the inhabitants of Minneapolis.** The elimination of the 1A route, which would have been cheaper than 3A but serve fewer people living on the edge of the metropolitan area, is indicative of this fact; suburban preferences are prioritized in the FTA alternatives analysis process. Otherwise, why not save money for the tunnel downtown by choosing the less expensive route out of town? A month of community meetings is unlikely to change the political reality that the 3A corridor is the only one that will get money from Washington.

At the moment, then, there is little Twin Cities inhabitants can do to push for the Uptown 3C corridor. Members of the Midtown Greenway Coalition, convinced that it will take decades to build any light rail to the southwest at all, **are arguing for** a quicker-to-build streetcar route along the Uptown corridor between the Hiawatha Line and the 3A route.

Nonetheless, in the longer term, **the FTA has a responsibility to revise the methods by which it determines the relative merits of a new transit corridor.** Rather than focusing on the commuting needs of suburbanites, planners and politicians should be concentrating their transit funds on encouraging a car-free lifestyle for people who live in inner-city areas. People who live in already existing, dense, mixed-use neighborhoods are most likely to be those

who choose to take transit, walk, and bike, and we should be working for their benefit. Yet the almost inevitable choice of the 3A alignment indicates that government today, even in its transit policy, isn't doing so.

(Note: data from Census 2000 SF-1 and SF-3.)