



METRO Orange Line Connecting Bus Study

Recommended Plan

MAY 2021

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: METRO ORANGE LINE CONNECTING BUS STUDY

The METRO Orange Line is scheduled to open in late 2021. It will substantially replace Route 535 with frequent (every 10-15 minutes), all-day service in the I-35W South corridor between downtown Minneapolis and Burnsville. There will be 12 stations in the 17-mile corridor serving Minneapolis, Richfield, Bloomington, and Burnsville as shown on a map in **APPENDIX A – Figure 1**.

This Recommended Plan builds on service recommendations that were based on an evaluation of current transit service in the study area conducted in 2019 and feedback from changes first proposed in early 2021. The Orange Line Connecting Bus Study Existing Conditions Report determined the market conditions, effectiveness, and efficiency of existing transit service and set the foundation for exploring potential new connecting service with the Orange Line, transit market opportunities, and facility needs. The Orange Line Connecting Bus Study Concept Plan proposed significant service changes on 11 routes, including new routes and the elimination of some existing routes. The Orange Line Connecting Bus Study Recommended Plan includes modifications to the Concept Plan based on feedback received from riders and other stakeholders.

All three reports use common transit planning terms such as “frequency” and “span.” Frequency is defined as the amount of time between trips in the same direction on a route; span is the amount of time per day a route operates, otherwise stated as the first departure on the first trip to last arrival on the last trip.

Study area

The study area, shown in **APPENDIX A – Figure 2**, is bounded by the Mississippi River on the east, I-394 on the north, Highway 169 on the west, and the Minnesota River on the south. The Study Area is urban in the northern half, including downtown Minneapolis, and covering many neighborhoods in south Minneapolis, and suburban in the southern half, covering Bloomington, Edina, and Richfield. Although the Orange Line extends to Burnsville, this study will not include areas south of the Minnesota River because this area is served by a separate transit provider, Minnesota Valley Transit Authority (MVTA).

Project goals

Goals of the Orange Line Connecting Bus Service Study include:

- Link significant concentrations of residents, jobs, and services with the METRO Orange Line
- Retain existing customers, grow ridership. Prioritize service for communities of color, people experiencing poverty and those who rely on transit the most
- Simplify the route network by emphasizing directness and avoiding branches
- Enhance the mobility and connectivity of the transit network
- Complement existing commuter and express service in the corridor

A note on COVID-19 and impacts on the planning process

While the long-term ridership impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are not known, the short-term effects have been significant. These recommendations are based on a mix of current ridership patterns and those that existed before the crisis, which may change in the long-term as people adapt and new travel needs emerge. To the extent possible and given the information available, the Recommended Plan

has considered potential long-term impacts to ridership and travel behavior in response to the crisis. However, the plan may need to be adjusted and the timeline for implementing certain changes may need to be modified later in the planning process based on market conditions at the time the Orange Line opens.

Recommended Plan

There are 25 routes in the study area: Routes 4, 6, 7, 11, 18, 21, 27, 46, 53,* 146,* 156,* 515, 535, 537,* 538, 539, 540, 542,* 552,* 553, 554,* 558,* 578, 579,* and 597. Note that routes marked with an asterisk (*) have been suspended since March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving 16 routes.

- 21 routes already serve a future Orange Line station south of downtown Minneapolis. (Routes 4, 11, 18, 21, 27, 46, 53,* 146,* 156,* 515, 538, 539, 540, 542,* 552,* 553, 554,* 558,* 578, 579,* and 597)
- No changes are recommended on 13 routes in the study area, so they are not described further in this report. (Routes 4, 6, 11, 18, 21, 46, 53,* 156,* 552,* 554,* 558,* 578, and 579*)
- Changes to route structure, frequency or span of service are proposed on 11 routes (Routes 7, 27, 515, 535, 537,* 538, 539, 540, 542,* 553 and 597)
- Five new routes are recommended for implementation (Routes 501, 534, 546, 547, 548)
- One new route proposed in the Concept Plan will not move forward (Route 536)

Recommended Plan: Changes to existing routes

Route 7: All remaining trips will be extended from 34th Ave. S. to Cedar Point Commons Shopping Center on 66th St. at Cedar Ave. in Richfield. During peak periods it will replace Route 515E between VA Medical Center and the 66th St. corridor. Selected weekday trips will serve VA Medical Center for a direct link with Route 515.

Route 27: All trips will be extended to directly serve I-35W & Lake St. Station, providing a connection with the Orange Line and other I-35W routes. This link will re-establish access to large employers such as Abbott Northwestern Hospital, Allina, Children's Hospital, and Wells Fargo Home Mortgage.

Route 515: Route will be simplified from three variations to one with no branches. Route 515B service on Longfellow Ave. will be eliminated, with partial replacement by new Route 501. The 515E branch to VA Medical Center will be replaced with a transfer between Route 515 and Route 7 at Cedar Point Commons or with the METRO Blue Line at Mall of America.

Route 535: The route will be largely replaced by the Orange Line. Areas currently served by four local branches will be replaced by new service:

- 535B, 535C, 535D via 76th St., Penn Ave., American Blvd., by Route 540 on 76th St.
- 535E via Lyndale Ave. in Bloomington by Route 534
- 535B, 535C, 535D via 94th St. and Lyndale Ave. by Route 534
- 535C via 94th St. and James Ave. by Route 546
- 535C, 535D via 98th St. and Normandale Community College by Route 539
- 535E via 102nd St. by Route 553

Route 537: This route is currently suspended due to the pandemic. Service will be restored along France Ave. between Southdale, Normandale College, and Valley West Shopping Center.

Route 538: No routing changes are proposed. Service will be improved from every 30/60 minutes to every 30 minutes in the midday.

Route 539: This route will connect Normandale College, 98th St., Old Shakopee Rd., and Mall of America with the Orange Line. Route 539 will be simplified so all trips follow the same path via 98th St. between 98th St. Station and Normandale Community College.

Route 540: The route will be simplified so all trips follow the same alignment. In Richfield, service will use the new 77th St. underpass to serve 24th Ave. S. and Mall of America. Service will be eliminated on American Blvd. when the underpass opens in late 2022; alternate service is via routes 5 and 542.

Route 542: This route is currently suspended due to the pandemic but will be restored. The route will remain south of I-494 to provide a connection with American Blvd. Station. Service will be extended west via American Blvd., E. Bush Lake Rd. and 78th St. to Braemar Arena in Edina, providing new access to employers located west of E. Bush Lake Rd. Service will be added midday, evening weekdays.

Route 553: This route will be re-oriented south of 98th St. to replace existing Route 535E via 98th St. Station, Lyndale Ave., 102nd St., and Portland Ave. There will be no service on 104th St. between Nicollet and Portland avenues.

Route 597: This route will be replaced by the Orange Line between 98th St. Station and downtown Minneapolis. New connecting routes 547 and 548 will replace local service west of I-35W in Bloomington.

New Routes

Route 501: New route will connect Mall of America Transit Station with air cargo companies such as FedEx and UPS located on Cargo Rd. near the airport for weeknight shifts, effectively replacing the Route 515B branch.

Route 534: This new route will connect with the Orange Line at both 98th St. Station and American Blvd. Station every day. It will serve Lyndale Ave., American Blvd., Penn Ave, 90th St., Poplar Bridge Rd., Colledgeview Rd., and Normandale Community College. Replaces part of current Route 539.

Route 536: This new route was included in the Concept Plan but is not recommended for implementation. It is replaced by routes 534 and 546.

Route 546: This new route will connect with the Orange Line at 98th St. Station every day. It will serve 98th St., Penn Ave., Old Shakopee Rd., Valley West Center, France Ave., Normandale Community College, and Normandale Village. Replaces part of current Route 539. Rush-hour trips will divert to serve employers on James Ave. and 94th St.

Route 547: This route will replace Route 597C and Route 597E. It will connect at 98th St. Station with the Orange Line to link southwest Bloomington employers on Old Shakopee Rd. and residents on Auto Club Rd., Normandale Blvd., 110th St., and 98th St.

Route 548: This route will replace current Route 597B and connect residents along Hyland Greens Dr., Normandale Blvd., W. 102nd St., and Old Shakopee Rd. with the Orange Line at 98th St. Station.

Service equity analysis

The results of the service equity analysis show no disparate impact on minority populations but do show disproportionate burden on low-income populations as a result of service changes under the Orange Line Connecting Bus Study Recommended Plan. However, staff firmly believe this quantitative finding is largely due to limitations of the service equity analysis methodology – notably its inability to account for destinations and improved accessibility – and the current disruption of service due to the COVID-19 pandemic, wherein previously-suspended routes critical to the broader Orange Line connecting bus service network are recommended to be reinstated. Further, it was found that low-income residents would experience a greater absolute increase in the number of weekly scheduled bus trips available near their home (+261) compared to non-low-income residents (+224), on average.

Having sought ways to avoid, minimize, or mitigate the impacts on low-income residents; the availability of service alternatives for those low-income residents with service decreases; and considering the analysis findings within the broader context of project goals and other measures of service benefits; Metro Transit has decided to continue with the Recommended Plan. Staff firmly believe that the Recommended Plan best meets the project goals and provides important service improvements for all service area residents, including BIPOC and low-income residents. The complete Title VI Service Equity Analysis report is available at metrotransit.org/OLCB.

Public outreach and next steps

The Concept Plan was brought to the public for review and comment in early 2021. The official public comment period extended from Jan. 25 to Feb. 22 to allow transit customers and other stakeholders the opportunity to provide feedback. Due to the pandemic, most engagement was virtual or electronic, with some in-person intercept surveys. The primary engagement tool was an online survey, promoted through a variety of channels to ensure we engaged a diverse cross-section of existing and potential riders. For a detailed description of the outreach methods, please see the Engagement Report available on the project website.

As part of the public outreach process, a public hearing and two community meetings were held virtually:

- Virtual community meetings Feb. 6 and 9
- Virtual public hearing on Feb. 10

Major Themes from Public Outreach

The respondents to the public outreach clearly supported the proposed route and service changes that are *most* essential for success of the METRO Orange Line. These are the routes making direct connections at an Orange Line Station that are required to access the Orange Line and to replace routes 535 and 597. **Major concerns that are largely addressed by the Recommended Plan include:**

- Maintain a direct link between 66th St. and VA Medical Center, at least on weekdays.
- Route 515 service should return to every 15minutes on weekdays and Saturdays.
- Route 515 needs to remain convenient for apartment residents near E. 77th St. and 12th Ave. S.
- Employees at air cargo companies near the airport need access by transit.
- W. 90th St residents need all-day service.
- W. Old Shakopee Rd – E. 98th St travelers desire direct service now provided by Route 539.

- East-west connections to Mall of America, Normandale Community College, and Valley West Center must work well and be made at a sheltered location.
- All-day service is needed on American Blvd. and on 76th/77th St.
- Travel time and transfers between southwest Bloomington and Minneapolis result by replacing Route 597.

Next Steps

The Metropolitan Council will be asked to approve the final recommended plan in June 2021. These service changes are planned for implementation with the opening of the Orange Line in late 2021.

Please visit metrotransit.org/OLCB for project updates.