

## **In the Obama-Era, Plans Revive for a Northfield-Twin Cities Rail Line**

By Logan Nash

With the national economy still a giant question mark, Northfield community leaders are pushing ahead to revive a long-delayed project to build a commuter rail line that would link the town to the Twin Cities metropolitan region.

The national economic downturn is precisely why a serious reconsideration of the commuter line, called the Dan Patch Corridor, is especially warranted right now, the line's advocates say.

“It would create jobs, it would put people to work, it would make the community more attractive,” said Rep. David Bly, Northfield's representative in the Minnesota legislature and a strong proponent of the line.

Bly and his state Senate counterpart, Kevin Dahle, sponsored a proposal in this year's legislative session to remove a 2002 ban on study and discussion of the route. They did so at the behest of Northfield constituents and community leaders, as well as the Twin Cities Metropolitan Council, the

transit planning agency serving the seven-county metropolitan area.

The legislation was stopped in conference committee, but many Northfield leaders remain committed to bringing some form of reliable alternative transportation to the community. And according to Northfield City Council member Kris Vohs, the Obama administration, which has made infrastructure a priority, has potential to help this effort.

“There will be stimulus money from the feds to create jobs,” Vohs said.

“And if they’re doing it smartly, it will be in these kinds of projects -- rail and rapid transit.”

Northfield’s demography and geography make it an ideal destination for a commuter line from the Twin Cities, advocates say. Located on the southern fringe of the Twin Cities metro, it has both a small town, tourist-friendly feel, and the cosmopolitanism provided by two prominent liberal arts colleges, Carleton College and St. Olaf College.

“We have the best of both worlds,” Dahle said. “Commuter rail would open that up. Not just for commuters, but also for events.”

Bly points out that the rail tracks for the proposed line already exist. As recently as the 1960's they supported passenger service, but the line is now only being used for occasional freight, according to Vohs. The tracks simply need to be upgraded to support a safe and reliable commuter rail corridor. And the project would create new jobs and improved access to all communities on the line, stimulating economic growth.

Other commuter rail lines are already either in planning or under construction in different parts of the metro area. The Northstar Commuter Rail Corridor, running from downtown Minneapolis to Big Lake in the northwest metro region, will open next year. According to Metropolitan Council projections, the Red Rock Corridor, linking the Twin Cities to the town of Hastings, to the southeast, will be the next priority.

Technically, however, the Dan Patch Corridor can't even be discussed by the metro region's planning officials. That's because in 2002, legislators from the southern suburbs, under pressure from constituents living close to the rail line, pushed through a ban on construction, design, study, or even discussion of the route by the Metropolitan Council.

According to Bly, this lack of dialogue about transit options for the area is

the real problem. “I just want to get people talking,” he said.

Bly introduced his legislation to overturn the ban after hearing directly from constituents, and after reading a January editorial in the Northfield News newspaper that was critical of the ban. The Metropolitan Council was eager to see another transportation option made available for discussion and, together with state Democratic leadership, the council supported Bly and Dahle in their effort to remove the discussion ban.

Debate in the legislature was intense. Opposition came largely from the same southern suburbs that killed the corridor six years ago. Legislators from these districts questioned the overall cost and financial structure that was proposed to pay for the route, and pointed out constituent concerns about proximity of the commuter rail tracks to residential homes.

Sen. John Doll of Bloomington, whose predecessor, Sen. William Belanger, was a sponsor of the 2002 ban, said that he originally was open to the idea of reopening discussion. But he finally concluded that it wasn't worth the money after considering pressure from residents and the high cost of the line.

“As we’re looking at budget tightening,” Doll said, “we have to look at creative ways of expanding transit.”

Sen. Geoff Michel of Edina emphasizes the negative response from nearby homeowners. “Feedback from Edina and Bloomington constituents was loud and clear,” he said. “Surprise, anger and fear that this issue was coming up again. Michel added that earlier studies had concluded that passenger rail did not make sense for the corridor.

Yet Vohs, who has been involved in the previous studies, said that his sense was that these investigations were stacked against the corridor from the start. He suggested that a fresh look is necessary.

“You have to stand up to vocal critics as an elected official,” Vohs said.

“Where is the silent majority? You have to get enough support from them to do the right thing.”

Bly argues that a transit project would provide fresh economic stimulus and jobs in an economy in dire need of both.

In addition, Bly says his priority isn't necessarily getting the Dan Patch Corridor built in its current form, but rather simply encouraging dialogue about getting new forms of transit into the area.

“This is a way to focus energy and excitement on a plan,” he said. “It makes the Met Council and MNDOT look at a solution.”

In the end, the legislation to overturn the 2002 discussion ban on the Dan Patch corridor made it through both the House and Senate, thanks in part to a Democratic leadership friendly to the idea, including House Transportation Committee chair Rep. Frank Hornstein.

Yet the bill was eventually rolled into the session's omnibus transportation bill, where it was quietly deleted when the conference committee reconciled the House and Senate versions of this large piece of legislation.

“You can pass a bill on the floor of the House, you can pass a bill on the floor of the Senate, and then it can just disappear” said a frustrated Dahle. Bly has two explanations for why the legislation to lift the 2002 discussion ban met such a sudden demise. The language was going to be line-item vetoed by the governor anyway, some sources told him, so it was simply

removed. Other members of the legislature have said that blocking his move to lift the discussion ban was a reward to Rep. Ron Erhardt of Edina, a Dan Patch opponent, in return for his support of the larger transportation package.

Although he affirmed his stance against the corridor, Erhardt denied he organized the removal of the language. He claimed that he was planning on voting for the larger transportation bill “long before they did the Dan Patch piece.”

In either case, Northfield community members in favor of the Dan Patch commuter line proposal have not given up on the hope of better transit access to the Twin Cities.

Northfield Mayor-elect Mary Rossing points out that improved transit links to the cities is a priority for the community, and she supports efforts to put commuter rail back on the table. The 2002 gag order on discussion of the Dan Patch was “obviously NIMBY motivated,” she said, using the well-known acronym for “not in my backyard.”

Vohs said that he would be interested in getting involved in a new push for the line. “If they start to study it again, I really want to be on that,” he said. “I won’t be quiet about it at all. I think it’s a really good idea.”

Northfield’s two colleges, whose students mostly do not own automobiles, are both eager to see some sort of commuter rail come to the town. The two colleges currently cooperate in providing bus service into the Twin Cities, but rising fuel costs have forced them to cut down on the number of scheduled runs in recent years.

“The co-op bus used to run every day of the week,” said Becca Campbell of the Carleton Campus Activities office, which helps establish transportation options for students. “We’ve had to adjust for ever-increasing costs, primarily due to fuel. Even now, with limited weekend schedules, what we charge [to students] comes nowhere near to paying for the service.”

The solution, Campbell says, is to create a dedicated commuter line like the Dan Patch Corridor. This would bring Northfield commuters together with college students and employees to share the cost of providing effective and frequent transit. According to Campbell, what the colleges are presently

paying for intermittent bus service could easily be shifted to some kind of transit such as commuter rail.

Northfield residents and businesses are interested in the possibility of greater connections as well. “I think there would be more people going from Northfield to the Cities,” said Northfield resident Mim Mueller. “It would be perfect if it connected to the light-rail line.”

“It’s great if there’s another reason to come up here,” said Gina Lovestrand, manager at the Monarch gift store in Northfield.

Jerry Bilek, owner of bookstore Monkey See, Monkey Read also favors the corridor. “I think in general, rail and other forms of transportation should be a solution to our problem right now,” Bilek said.

Bly and Dahle say they plan to bring up the ban in next year’s session.

“I’ve had both Republicans and Democrats tell me how great this train option would be,” Bly said. “We’d like to see something happen. We need to keep the pressure on.”