



The new Hiawatha Line, which stops at the Mall of America.
Photo Courtesy of the City of Minneapolis

The First Fast Train in Minnesota

Minneapolisians get downright cosmopolitan

BY SAM NEWBERG

It has been nearly three years since Minnesotans got light rail service. We're still getting used to it, city-slickers, suburbanites, and outstayers alike. The new train line, the Hiawatha, runs between downtown Minneapolis, the University of Minnesota, the international airport, the Metrodome, and the Mall of America, and the tracks stretch for 12 miles. (By contrast, there are 222 miles of light rail track in Chicago and 840 miles in New York City.) The train has 24 cars and hits a top speed of 55 mph. Although some in the Twin Cities have ridden rail mass transit elsewhere, most have not: the transit authority estimates that more than 50 percent of train riders are new to transit since the service began. But ridership has also been 65 percent higher than anyone projected. Minnesotans are seeing the world in a whole new way, and compared to the bus, it's an upgrade. Not long ago, a passen-

ger near me exclaimed: "You can see so much outside the window!" Indeed you can. That's our city out there.

The comments and behavior of first-time train riders range from quaintly naïve to downright preposterous. I once heard someone on the train say, "Hey, they should run this thing up to Brainerd," not realizing, perhaps, the taxpayer cost involved in running light rail through 100 miles of sparsely populated Minnesota countryside. Occasionally, near downtown Minneapolis, the PA system announces the next station, but the train stops short of the platform. Newbies tap frantically on a blue but-

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ton near the door, afraid they are missing their stop. (Typically a member of the Minnesota Nice contingent calmly explains that we are not yet at the station.) I heard another rider, who may have noticed the bicycle racks inside the train, say, "They should put a trailer hitch on this thing so you could tow your boat." Only in the land of 10,000 lakes.

Not all of us are so slow to catch on to train travel. For years, a plan has been in the works to connect the Hiawatha line to a 40-mile commuter rail corridor, which would run from downtown Minneapolis to Big Lake, Minnesota, and other fast-growing northern suburbs. The Northstar Corridor Rail Project, which will run on Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railroad's existing tracks, will cost an estimated \$307 million to build and would shuttle 10,000 passengers each day. Construction is expected to begin this spring.

On the Saturday before Christmas 2006, thousands of people descended on downtown Minneapolis for Holidayz, an increasingly popular holiday light parade. Metro Transit didn't charge for light rail rides that particular evening, knowing full well the pandemonium that would ensue from thousands of families who had never ridden the train learning how to buy tickets. Not to mention the grumpy kids hoping to see Santa. Someday very soon, we hope even Ole and Sven are old hands at mass transit. □