



TESTIMONY

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METROLINK EXPANSION

By David Stokes

Testimony before the St. Louis County Council

TO THE HONORABLE MEMBERS OF THIS COUNCIL

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. My name is David Stokes, and I am director of municipal policy at the Show-Me Institute, a nonprofit, nonpartisan, Missouri-based think tank that advances sensible, well-researched, free-market solutions to state and local policy issues. The ideas presented here are my own and summarize the work of Randal O'Toole in his recent study about potential MetroLink expansion in St. Louis that was released by the Show-Me Institute in September.

Metro announced reductions to the bus system in June of 2023.¹ This was after it had previously decreased bus services in November of 2022.² Those changes were after prior bus route cuts in March of 2022.³ Now it intends to spend \$850 billion to expand MetroLink, which will further cannibalize of our public transit system.⁴

MetroLink isn't a solution to poor

transit service. The proposed north-south line would operate along a route already served by numerous bus routes. More to the point, the reason less than 4% of Saint Louisans commute on transit isn't because they have trouble going from North City to downtown. It's because the antiquated "hub and spoke" model Metro uses makes travelling from North City to employment centers in Central and West County a multi-transfer odyssey. If regional leaders truly want to improve mobility, they'd do better by focusing on our general bus system or advancing bus-rapid-transit (BRT) lines.

Buses are able to change routes and frequency as population and employment patterns change. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a prime example of how fast the labor market can shift. Employment patterns have dramatically changed in a short period of time as more people work from home, yet Metro insists on expanding a light-rail model designed to serve pre-World War II St. Louis. For just a fraction of the local cost of expanding MetroLink, the region

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could restore cuts from its bus system and construct several BRT lines in its long-range transportation plan.

Furthermore, light rail isn't a solution to automobile dependence. Saint Louis has a low population density and widely dispersed employment centers that make the city a bad fit for light rail. Popular, cost-effective light rail systems require population densities upwards of 20,000 people per square mile, but Saint Louis City has fewer than 5,000 people per square mile. Experience with existing MetroLink routes demonstrates our region's preference for the car. Today, fewer Saint Louisans use transit than in 1990, before MetroLink even operated. Even more embarrassing, MetroLink has lower ridership today than it did in 2005, the year before the Shrewsbury line opened.⁵

Nor is MetroLink a cure for anemic urban development. Despite claims of rail advocates, the economic consensus is that light rail *is not* a catalyst for economic growth.⁶ We can see with our own two eyes that MetroLink has failed to spur development in Saint Louis. Far from rejuvenating depressed areas, MetroLink has even failed to prevent decline in areas that seemed to be on the rise in 1994 when the first lines opened, such as Laclede's Landing. Most of the development that has happened along MetroLink (including that which is generally considered to be successful) has been heavily subsidized by taxpayers, including the Cortex area.

This council should carefully consider what benefits could possibly justify a \$850 million MetroLink expansion, and whether or not it's just an expensive "remedy" to treat problems for which we already have more sound solutions. County government should use the means at its disposal to pressure Bi-State to cease its plans to expensively and

fruitlessly expand MetroLink and use its local tax money to improve our bus system. We should have a system that serves the people who use mass transit, not the people urban planners dream about using mass transit.

NOTES

1. Goodwin, Jeremy. "Reduced MetroBus schedule means fewer trips in evenings and on weekends." St. Louis Public Radio, June 9, 2023.
2. Lippmann, Rachel. "Region's bus riders facing additional service cuts as hiring struggles continue." St. Louis Public Radio, November 28, 2022.
3. Ibid.
4. Clancy, Sam. "Bi-State Development moving ahead with planning phase of MetroLink expansion." KSDK, March 24, 2023.
5. O'Toole, Randal. "Is St. Louis Transit Built for the 2020s or the 1910s?" Show-Me Institute Report, September 2023.
6. Miller, Joseph, and Renz, Graham. "Light rail is snake oil for St. Louis." *St. Louis Business-Journal*, Show-Me Institute commentary, August 4, 2016.



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