



TESTIMONY

February 9, 2024

METROLINK EXPANSION

By David Stokes

Public Comments for the Board of Directors of the East-West Gateway Council of Governments

TO THE HONORABLE MEMBERS OF THIS BOARD

Thank you for the opportunity to submit these comments. 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 2023 as well as additional research on this subject.

Bi-State Development Agency, commonly known as Metro, announced reductions to the bus system in June 2023¹ after it had previously decreased bus services in November 2022.² Those changes were after prior bus route cuts in March of 2022.³ Now it intends to spend \$1.1 billion to expand MetroLink, which will further cannibalize our public transit system.⁴ (Metro is promising to try to lower the total cost of the project to between \$800 and

\$850 million instead of the current requested approval of \$1.1 billion.)

MetroLink isn't a solution to poor transit service. It is a cause of 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 four percent 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.

In both Metro's formal presentations and the revised locally preferred alternative (LPA) document submitted to you, Metro has cited changing commuter patterns and more remote work as a reason *for* expanding Metrolink.⁵ This is an absurd example claiming that up is down and night is day. Buses

ADVANCING LIBERTY WITH RESPONSIBILITY
BY PROMOTING MARKET SOLUTIONS
FOR MISSOURI PUBLIC POLICY

are much more capable than light rail is of adjusting to changes to routes and frequency as population and employment patterns change.

The COVID-19 pandemic 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 not only a pre-pandemic St. Louis but a pre-World War II St. Louis. For just a fraction of the local cost of expanding MetroLink, the region 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 mass 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.⁶

Metro projects that the new MetroLink line along Jefferson Avenue will have 5,200 daily boardings. We can't predict the future, but we can judge how Metro's prior projections turned out for previous MetroLink expansions. A review of past projections does not bode well for the current projections. I have reviewed daily boarding projections for future stations from the 1999 Cross-County MetroLink Extension (CCME) report and the 2004 Metro South MetroLink Extension report. The full projections for the CCME stations (which were made in both of the stated reports) are in Table 1. I compared the projections to actual ridership totals from 2018 that were analyzed and released in 2020 by activists at UrbanSTL, a pro-transit St. Louis group. (Source citations accompany Table 1).

The 1999 projection for average daily boardings at the downtown Clayton MetroLink station was 4,604. The 2004 projections, which were made after construction

on the CCME had begun but before it opened, were for 5,424. The actual average daily boardings in 2018 were just 913.

The 1999 projections for the Shrewsbury station were for 5,333 boardings. The revised 2004 projection was lower, at 3,454 boarding. The actual 2018 average daily boardings were just 1,523.

These two examples are the rule, not the exceptions. The busiest station on the entire line, the Central West End with 4,885 daily boardings in 2018, had only slightly more than half of its 2004 projections. This is the unmistakable fact of the ridership projections by Metro, its consultants, and the planners at EWGCOG. The projections have consistently been substantially higher than actual users. The numbers now are likely even worse, as the most recent data available for station totals came from before the pandemic. Individual station average daily totals for 2024 would almost certainly be lower than in 2018, and likely much lower.

MetroLink is not 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.⁷ We can see with our own 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 board should carefully consider what benefits could possibly justify a \$1.1 billion MetroLink expansion (or an "affordable" \$850 million version), and whether or not it's just an expensive "remedy" to treat problems for which we already have more sound solutions. This board should use the means at its disposal to pressure Bi-State Development Agency to cease its plans to expensively and fruitlessly expand MetroLink and use its local tax money to improve our region's bus system and institute BRT routes. We should have a system that serves the people who actually use mass transit, not the people urban planners dream about using mass transit.

Table 1: MetroLink Ridership Totals

New MetroLink Station	1999 Projected Boardings for Extension Opening in 2006	2004 Projections For 2025 Boardings	2018 Actual Boardings
Lambert Main		1558	1060
Lambert East		173	380
North Hanley		2309	2713
UMSL North		871	385
UMSL South		1405	516
Rock Road		1896	1408
Wellston		2274	848
Delmar		1949	1692
Forest Park		8404	3711
Central West End		8665	4885
Grand		4567	2535
Union Station		3657	1142
Civic Center		2169	2217
Busch Stadium		3157	1180
8th and Pine		3710	1382
Convention Center		3919	1309
Laclede's Landing		1800	563
Forest Park	3384*	8404	3711
Skinker	173†	1880	887
Big Bend North	883	1001	486
Carondelet Plaza	615	902	362
Downtown Clayton	4604	5424	913
Galleria	764	1041	618
Eager Park & Ride	2026	3319	916
Manchester	477	788	770
Big Bend South	245	1091	243
Lansdowne	5333	3454	1523
Total All Stations		79787	38355
Total CCME	18504	27304	10429
Total CCME Corrected‡	19331	27304	10429

CCME = Cross-County MetroLink Extension

* Forest Park - The 1999 projections are additional boardings for an existing station that is the meeting place of two lines. The 2025 projections and 2018 actual boardings are the total boardings at the station for both lines.

† Skinker - The 1999 projections are almost certainly an error in the report. The 2025 projections are likely closer to what they actually projected in 1999. For totals at the bottom, we placed an estimate of 1,000 boardings in their 1999 projections.

‡Change Skinker 1999 error to 1,000.

Sources: Metro South MetroLink Extension, "Alternatives Analysis and DEIS 2025 Ridership Forecasting & Methodology Report," Prepared by Manuel Padron & Assoc. for EWGCOG, December 2004.

Cross-County MetroLink Extension, "Segment I Conceptual Design," Staff Recommendations to the Board of Directors, EWGCOG, June 1999.

UrbanSTL
<https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/alex6127/viz/MetroLinkPercentChangeinRidership2011to2018byStation/Dashboard1>.

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. Bi-State Development. "Revised Northside-Southside LPA Jefferson Alignment Proposal," East-West Gateway Council of Government, January 23, 2024, page 6.
6. O'Toole, Randal. "Is St. Louis Transit Built for the 2020s or the 1910s?" Show-Me Institute Report, September 2023.
7. Miller, Joseph, and Renz, Graham. "Light rail is snake oil for St. Louis." *St. Louis Business-Journal*, Show-Me Institute commentary, August 4, 2016.



5297 Washington Place · Saint Louis, MO 63108 · 314-454-0647

Visit us:
showmeinstitute.org

Find us on Facebook:
Show-Me Institute

Follow us on Twitter:
@showme

Watch us on YouTube:
Show-Me Institute