

Grand Avenue testing ground – Study could usher in future of rapid busing to West Duluth

By [Brady Slater](#) on May 18, 2018 at 9:51 p.m.



A DTA bus stops to pick up passengers on the corner of 46th Avenue West and Grand Avenue on Friday afternoon. Transportation planners in the Twin Ports will soon study to see if "bus rapid transit" might work in West Duluth. Tyler Schank / tschank@duluthnews.com

A popular public transit concept will be studied this year to test its compatibility to West Duluth, where between 10,000-12,000 passengers travel by bus every weekday. Mostly they board along Grand Avenue on their way to downtown and back.

Beginning in June and through the rest of the year, transportation planners in the Twin Ports will study to see if "bus rapid transit," or elements of it, might work in West Duluth, where Duluth Transit Authority ridership is twice what it is in the city's eastern half.

As far as bus rapid transit goes, think of it as urban light rail except with buses.

"It's expanding throughout the U.S.," said Chris Belden, a planner with the Duluth-Superior Metropolitan Interstate Council. "As an alternative it can be about seven times cheaper than light rail while having similar customer service approval."

Bus rapid transit requires long stretches of roadway and works by keeping buses out of the mix of regular traffic. True urban use of bus rapid transit features buses arriving more frequently in dedicated bus lanes. Other features include off-board fare collection stations and platform-level boarding, which eliminates steps and makes for easier wheelchair accessibility. It adds up to a faster passenger experience with less stopping or waiting around.

Local planners are excited to test Duluth, specifically Grand Avenue, against its standards, but suspect the city, while a good candidate due to being long and narrow, could be better suited for a lesser, hybrid-type application of the concept.

"This is super preliminary," said Sophia Parr, the DTA's director of planning and grants. "Ultimately what we're trying to do is start the conversation."

The concept first came up this week during the monthly meeting of the Metropolitan Interstate Council policy board. Belden gave a report on the upcoming study, which is being paid for and was initiated by the DTA. Parr said the DTA is using leftover money from its transit development plan — a required process and document the DTA updates every five years and uses to plan for the future.

"It was recommended we look in the future toward some higher capacity-type options for our service," Parr said. "We decided to partner with MIC to see what it could mean for the region."

As things are, the farther west in the city a person starts out, the better vehicle times compare to the DTA bus when it comes to getting downtown. By the time a person starts on the bus at the Lake Superior Zoo around 72nd Avenue West, a vehicle can reach downtown up to three times faster — "a big disparity," Belden said.

For the study, things such as busing patterns and the lengths of time it takes passengers to board will be analyzed at stops along Grand Avenue. By using existing data, Belden already knows some of what he's looking for. He's found that less than half of a rider's time is spent traveling.

"They're at the lights 20 percent of the time and boardings 20 percent of the time," Belden said. "Those are the two large delays in time you find in transit."

Both planners agreed the future will yield more housing developed farther and farther west. Understanding that, it left the planners to wonder if it's possible to take the busiest bus routes the city has to offer and make those services even better.

"One of the big goals of bus rapid transit is to increase ridership," Parr said. "Wherever we've found it, there's been a increase. That's what we want to dive into here."

Parr said the report from the study figures to be done shortly before the end of the year. It could recommend going forward into a more developmental phase, or "we could find out this type of thing doesn't make sense for our region," Parr said.

But simply by studying the concept, it's hard not to at least consider its potential.

"It could easily be an opportunity to prepare for more riders in the future," Parr said.

"Grand Avenue is really interesting," Belden added. "That corridor has some of our best transit ridership. I'm excited to take a look at this. It could play itself into an express or bus rapid transit-type of service."