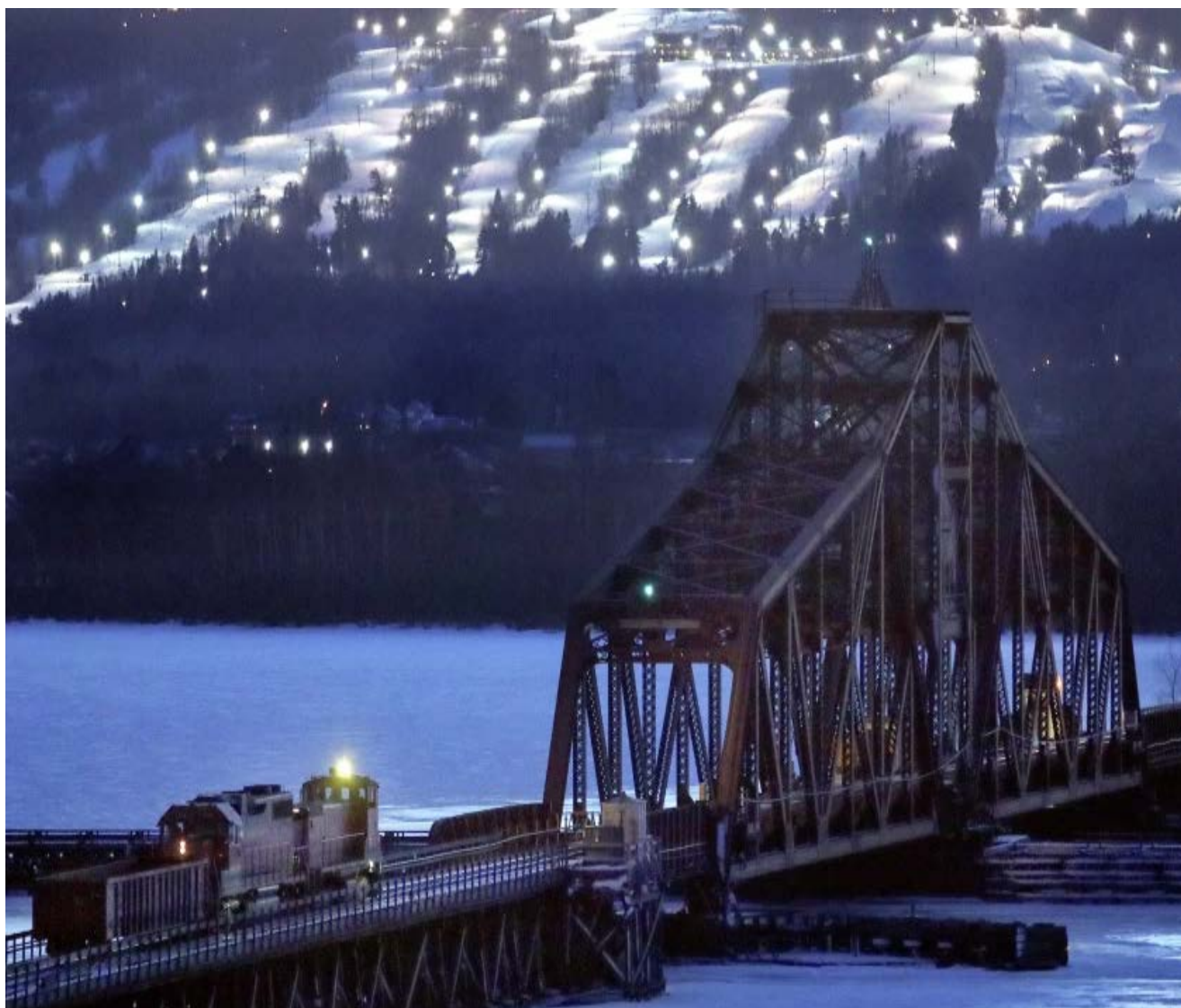


Twin Cities-Duluth passenger rail backers propose \$99M to kick-start line

duluthnewstribune.com/news/minnesota/twin-cities-duluth-passenger-rail-backers-propose-99m-to-kick-start-line

January 24, 2023

The Northern Lights Express, or NLX, would connect downtown Minneapolis to the St. Louis County Depot in Duluth. Stops are planned in Coon Rapids, Cambridge, Hinckley and Superior, Wis.



The lights of Spirit Mountain shine beyond the Grassy Point railroad bridge in March 2017. The proposed Northern Lights Express passenger rail service would use the bridge on its route linking the Twin Ports and the Twin Cities.

Steve Kuchera / File / Duluth News Tribune

ST. PAUL — Minnesota legislators have started to work on securing funding for a long-anticipated passenger rail line between Duluth and the Twin Cities, with bills in the House and Senate calling for \$99 million from the state general fund to start the service.

If Gov. Tim Walz signed off on that legislation, it would unlock \$396 million in matching federal funding for the Northern Lights Express rail service, which advocates say has its best shot yet this year with the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party in control of state government and a \$17.6 billion surplus. It would be the first passenger rail connection between Duluth and the Twin Cities since the mid-1980s.

“I’m feeling really hopeful,” said Sen. Grant Hauschild, DFL-Hermantown, who was elected last fall to represent northeast Minnesota’s Arrowhead region. “This has always gotten tied up usually by one or two votes in the past, and now we control the chamber and my seat was really kind of a critical one in that regard.”

The Northern Lights Express, or NLX, would use 152 miles of existing BNSF Railway track and connect Target Field in downtown Minneapolis to the St. Louis County Depot in Duluth. Stops are planned in Coon Rapids, Cambridge, Hinckley and Superior, Wis.

Republican opposition has prevented the project from moving forward in the past. GOP lawmakers, including those along the route, have questioned if the level of ridership and length of the trip would justify the expense. The Minnesota Department of Transportation estimates a trip on the NLX would take about 2½ hours and could possibly outperform drive times depending on weather and traffic. Transportation officials estimate up to 750,000 people will ride the train in the first year of service

Earlier estimates placed the price tag for the line, which would be run by Amtrak, at \$450 million. The current proposals in the Legislature would cover the cost of a \$495 million project. If the state approves funding, the NLX Alliance, a coalition of interested groups along the route, says it expects the route to begin operating in about three years.

Much work lies ahead in the coming months for Minnesota lawmakers piecing together the state’s budget and borrowing bills. Hauschild, who is co-sponsoring the bill authored by Sen. Jen McEwen, DFL-Duluth, said his fellow NLX backers are keeping their options open for how the state will pay for the project.

One route is to pay for the route through a public works borrowing bill, or bonding bill, but that would require a three-fifths supermajority. But after years of GOP opposition and a slim DFL majority in the Senate, Democrats may not view that option as viable.

“You are talking Republican votes needed for the bonding side of things,” Hauschild said. “And as we know in the past, this has been held up so, we’ll see what the appetite is.”

Gov. Tim Walz also signaled support when he asked for \$16 million for the project in his \$2.7 billion bonding proposal last year. He's set to release complete details of his bonding and budget priorities this week.

Supporters of the NLX are enthusiastic this year about the odds for the proposed rail line now that the DFL controls all three branches of state government.

"In all of my years in elected office, I've never seen so much enthusiasm among legislators for a bill," Minneapolis City Councilman Andrew Johnson, chair of the NLX Alliance, said in a news release on the funding bills.

Hauschild and McEwen, the bill's main authors, have said the route will provide vital access for veterans in northern Minnesota who need access to services at the VA Medical Center in Minneapolis.

This story was updated at 12:40 p.m. Jan. 24 to correct the NLX route map. It was originally posted at 6:31 p.m. Jan. 23. Forum News Service regrets the error.





