

DAVID BREWSTER • Star Tribune
The new 46th Street Transit Station, as seen looking north toward downtown Minneapolis from the 50th Street overpass.

In case you were wondering, it's a sleek, new transit station

- It's the first and only of its kind in Minnesota. More are needed, sooner than planned.

By PETER WAGENIUS

What is that?" asked a friend calling from his cell phone on Interstate 35W. "That thing at 46th Street," asked another weeks later, "are they building a transit station in the middle of the freeway?"

Now that construction is complete and new transit service is up and running, these simple questions have been answered. The 46th Street Transit Station puts transit in the fast lane — literally. Buses don't have to fight their way on and off the freeway, but can instead pick up passengers quickly and get right back into a lane where buses have priority.

While the station is the first of its kind in Minnesota, it represents much more:

1. It is something we can agree on.

In a time of hyperpartisan politics, opportunities to find common ground should be grabbed with both hands. The history of 35W is worth repeating. Ten years ago, there was a wide gulf between those who wanted a wider freeway and others who wanted "light-rail transit [LRT] or nothing."

Today, there is a broad, bipartisan, urban/suburban coalition of cities united behind a vision of building bus rapid transit (BRT) on 35W and Hwy. 77/Cedar Avenue. This coalition, including Minneapolis, Richfield, Bloomington, Burnsville, Lakeville and Apple Valley, successfully pushed for a competitive grant (not an earmark) from the Bush administration for \$133 million of improvements on these corridors.

This would not have been possible without a bill to study BRT authored by an unlikely coalition of legislators: Rep. Mary Liz Holberg, a conservative from Lakeville, and Rep. Frank Hornstein, a liberal from Minneapolis.

2. It's a cheaper alternative to light rail.

There is a gigantic gap between available dollars for transportation and the road and transit projects we hope to build. That means we must embrace innovation to maximize the capacity of the lane miles we have

already built. Whether or not you think government needs to act to stop global warming and reduce our reliance on fossil fuels (I do), this basic financial reality should drive us all to seek cost-effective alternatives to LRT.

Nobody would ever build a light-rail line one station at a time, but that's exactly what we're doing with bus rapid transit.

Some who support BRT may be motivated by an ideological opposition to rail. Others, like me, will continue to support LRT but simply don't want to wait to connect the whole region with high-speed transit. I believe LRT is the right choice on the corridors we're currently working on. But if our goal is to bring quality transit deep into third- and fourth-ring suburbs, we need more tools in our transit toolbox, particularly on freeways. Adding BRT can get us there decades sooner.

3. It's an opportunity that could slip away.
So why is the first in-line BRT station of its kind in Minnesota at 46th Street? Shouldn't the first station on 35W be at American Blvd. in Bloomington to access the vibrant commercial corridor of Interstate 494? Or at Lake Street, with its denser housing and access to major employers like Wells Fargo and Allina?

Frankly, it's an accident of history that the first station is at 46th Street. Of the several BRT stations planned for 35W, it just happened

to be the one included within the Crosstown reconstruction project. If we forget that, the 46th Street Station could end up being an unfair test of BRT's potential. Having attended elementary school a few blocks away, I know the world isn't waiting in line to travel to 46th and 1st. There's nothing wrong with that — lots of transit stations are collection points to gather riders, rather than destination points. The broader question is this: Why are we even talking about one first station? Nobody would ever build a light-rail line one station at a time. The idea is laughable. But that's exactly what we're doing with BRT.

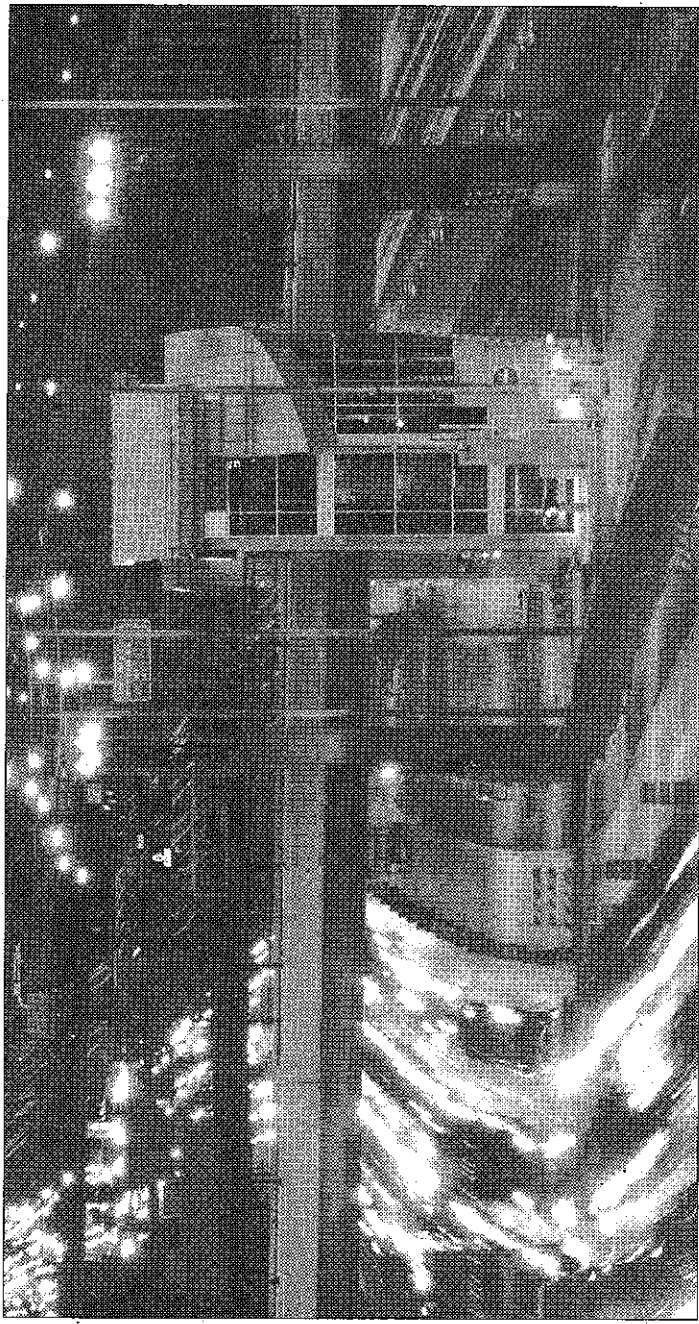
The Star Tribune has reported that members of the public don't know what bus rapid transit is. I don't blame them. Current plans call for a second BRT station to be built on 35W by 2018. At that pace, we may have fully functioning BRT in 36 years. That's a shame, because many other parts of the metro area are looking at BRT as a cost-effective alternative to LRT. How attractive will that alternative be if built one station at a time every eight years?

Imagine this during your next commute. We could call a truce in the counterproductive battle of roads vs. transit long enough to build transit improvements that people from cities and suburbs alike can fully support. We could save money by maximizing the capacity of the highways we have already built.

Think of that as you drive or ride past the new 46th Street Station. Instead of wondering what it is, ask your elected officials the more important question:

"Why is there just one?"

Peter Wagenius is policy director for Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak.



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