

Northstar Departing for Insanity  
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Nowhere in the USA do fares cover cost of operation commuter rail. The average public subsidy is 47% of operating costs. A widely known definition of insanity (Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and again and expecting a different outcome) applies to Northstar's extension. The last 100 years of commuter rail in the USA helps explain why spending taxpayer dollars on an extension of NorthStar fits the definition of insanity.

Early commuter rail, was of great importance to the United States from 1890 to 1925. Interurbans provided passengers service between cities and towns. Interurbans were a cross between a tram and a conventional train. In 1915, there were 15,500 miles of interurban rail in the US. <http://chicagocityofbigshoulders.blogspot.com/2013/05/electric-interurbans.html>

My home town (Kenosha, WI) was served by one of these rail lines. The Chicago, North Shore & Milwaukee Railroad (The North Shore Line) is representative of commuter rail's history. The North Shore Line was one of the most successful interurban systems ever put together. The history of the company dates to the 1890s and in terms of the passenger traffic it carried during its peak years of operations was the second busiest interurban in history. Unfortunately, the company's downfall was the plight of nearly all interurbans, the heavy reliance of

passenger traffic could not sustain it forever and bankruptcy finally came after a long legal battle in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

The North Shore once stretched from downtown Chicago to Milwaukee. Today only one segment, the Skokie Swift, remains in use for Chicago commuter service.

Given the fact that the company operated high-speed service and was located in a highly populated region it weathered the 1920s downfall of the interurban and initially did fine after the Great Depression hit.

World War II brought back traffic levels comparable to that of the great years of the 1920s. Total passenger traffic climbed from barely ten million revenue passengers in 1940 to almost twenty-eight million by 1945. By November of 1946 after nearly fourteen years of bankruptcy, the North Shore came out of bankruptcy. Trouble and crisis returned swiftly at the War's end.

Passenger traffic dropped and kept on declining. In 1948 a prolonged strike lasting more than three months, shut down the system; a better than 40 percent commuter fare increase enabled the company to meet the resultant wage increases and resume operations. In June, 1958, the North Shore asked for permission to abandon all operations. Five years later (1963) The North Shore ended service leaving one passenger provider (the Chicago and Northwestern) serving Chicago's north shore

communities. [http://www.tmer.org/Section/History/Chicago\\_North\\_Shore\\_and\\_Milwaukee/index.html](http://www.tmer.org/Section/History/Chicago_North_Shore_and_Milwaukee/index.html)

Prior to 1970 most railroads providing commuter service to Chicago were financially stable due to the benefits of increased traffic during the war years, expansion of suburbia and modernization of their fleets. By 1970 costs were rising and revenues were declining and in 1974 the Chicago Regional Transit Authority (RTA) was formed and commuter rail service became publicly funded and government operated. By 1983, after recurring financial difficulties, RTA was reorganized to a subdivision called METRA.

The old Chicago and Northwestern commuter rail service along the north shore of Lake Michigan is operated by METRA. The similarities of METRA's service from Chicago to Kenosha and the NorthStar are striking. METRA's service to Kenosha covers 51 miles and the current rail based Northstar is 40 miles. Both services use the rails of private railroads. The similarity ends when covering cost with fares is examined.

Fares collected on METRA cover 55% of operation costs. Northstar's fares covered only 20%. In 2017 METRA's Northshore line served ~1.8 million riders compared to 737,000 by Northstar.

Difference in population density along the two routes accounts for the large difference in cost recovery. since

Ridership and population density are correlated. The rail line from Kenosha to Chicago is densely populated. The Northstar corridor is lightly populated.

Commuter rail's history of decline lead to unprofitability, government subsidy, and public ownership. Investing in commuter rail meets the definition of insanity. Northstar's inability to come close to covering operating cost at the fare box simply repeats history further experimentation with Minnesota commuter rail is crazy.