

I am Gretchen Artig-Swomley, the Mayor of the City of Gem Lake, Minnesota. As you know, the City of Gem Lake is one of the cities that borders the future Rush Line BRT, now known as the Purple Line. I am writing to express my wholehearted support of SF 3859.

As the leader of a city on the proposed bus guideway, I find myself puzzled as to how an infrastructure project of this magnitude can get so far along in the planning process despite ever declining bus traffic on all other routes and massive and very organized opposition to the entire concept. I am writing in the hopes that you will start a common sense examination of the veracity of the project as a whole. I think your bill is an important first step. Our city has been in opposition to this plan for many years, although our feedback was largely ignored, marginalized, and sometimes, mischaracterized.

In July of 2020, the Gem Lake City Council voted no on supporting the Rush Line BRT/Purple Line project. This was referred to as the 15% vote. (White Bear Township did the same.) As you know, the City of White Bear has now added their no vote to the discussion. Gem Lake voted after much thought and much studying of data, bus traffic and over all project goals. In the minutes of this meeting we listed numerous reasons for our decision, such as intersection safety, impact on the Bruce Vento Trail, the cost of the project given that new roads were being constructed for it, etc.

Since then, bus traffic in our area appears to have declined even more. In fact, in past months I have personally monitored bus traffic through out the day at the Maplewood Transit Center and surrounding areas. Despite 10 trips to this location, I have not witnessed a single bus, ever, that had more than 2 people on it coming or going from this area. Many were empty or had one rider. The transit center is an important hub on the Purple Line route. The Purple Line's own survey of ridership showed that only about 9% of those asked planned to ride the bus daily or weekly. It is hard to imagine how large and nearly empty buses help alleviate problems associated with climate change or traffic congestion.

In July of 2021 the Met Council presented a transportation report to a Minnesota Legislative Committee on Transportation, citing a 50-70% drop in bus ridership since 2020. This is a particularly startling figure when you consider that literally no one was riding anything in 2020. A recent study published in the Star Tribune on July 21 stated that survey results show that 55% of companies who responded intended to make some form of remote work a permanent feature of employment. Traffic into downtown St. Paul is down significantly, according the Minnesota Department of Transportation figures. Given this, one would wonder why no adjustments have been made to ridership numbers.

The Northstar Line is yet another example of scientific projections on ridership that go seriously astray. The results of lack of public feedback are now center stage, as the Met Council asked for discontinuation or termination of the Northstar Line completely. The Southwest Line is an example of a complete lack of accountability for budgeting on the part of the Metropolitan Council. It is frustrating for the average citizen and for folks in my position to see how little actual facts or actual feedback seem to matter when planning these projects.

The Metropolitan Council in itself lacks accountability and has grown far too powerful over the course of the last few decades. In actual fact, a city's comprehensive plan, which is mandated and controlled by the Met Council, has a higher legal standing than a city's own zoning rules. It is now clear to me that the Met Council had a grand plan for transportation throughout the metro

area and intended to implement that plan despite public feedback that questioned the need for the project to begin with. As you may or may know, our Met Council is the only such council in the United States that is completely appointed, rather than elected. Portland has a somewhat similar power level in their met council, but even theirs is made up of elected officials. I think this has to change over time. People should know and understand the decision making process and who really has power in our state. It would be interesting to undertake a study of all past similar Met Council project in terms of ability to achieve project goals and maintain stated and approved budgets.

Previously, there was express bus service from downtown White Bear to downtown St. Paul. In August of 2019, several Gem Lake City Council members watched bus traffic for several days and noted that on average a maximum of 3-4 people rode each bus in the morning and 3-4 rode each bus in the afternoon. It was sometimes less than this. However, bus service existed and was not well utilized. We also monitored buses on English Street, near Lake Phalen for the same period. Buses were sometime empty, and occasional had several people on board. There were never more than several people on any of the 10 buses I witnessed. Note that the English Street bus line is only one block away from the new Purple Line route.

It is no secret that bus traffic is down significantly and is not expected to return to pre-COVID levels-ever. I cite for sources the Metropolitan Council. This fact was noted in an article published on October 17 in the Pioneer Press and was written by Bob Shaw. One of the experts from the Met Council says that remote work is probably here to stay, bus traffic is down significantly and the "hub and spoke" type of transport line is probably a thing of the past. Again, leaving me puzzled as to why this wasteful project is charging ahead. If you are familiar with downtown White Bear, it is safe to say the sidewalks get rolled up at night. The idea of that there is a need for 80 buses a day in and out of the area for 19-20 hours a day is rather comical. It sounds like the movie "Field of Dreams" without the ball players and the happy spectators. I view this project as a complete waste of money and a sad testament to how little public sentiment seems to matter. It is actually extremely hard to find someone in the White Bear area who thinks this project is a good idea. There was a public forum at the Kellerman Center on October 12 of 2021 in downtown White Bear. Over 200 people attended and were asked to express their opinion for or against the Purple Line. Of the many people who were able to get a spot to speak, not one of them was in favor of the Purple Line. Pretty striking. This event was also live streamed on facebook and that feature brought in an additional 60 people.

At this point, citizen opposition to this project is organized and very significant in the area. At the Marketfest event in summer 2021, people were lined up around the block to sign a petition against this project. Some said they came to the event, only so they could sign the petition. There are several petitions out there that with well over 5,000 signatures total. These petitions have been turned over to the White Bear Lake City Council. Even with the massive opposition that exists, councils are confused as to whether or not they actually have a say as to what happens in their own cities.

The feelings about this project that I am expressing in this testimony, very much reflect the opinions of our citizens. At our public hearing in July 2020 on this subject, 100% of those attending expressed complete opposition to the Purple Line. Only two homes in our community are within the stated target area of a ten minute walk from a station. When we expressed and explained our reasons for opposing this project last summer in a conference call to the Purple Line and County leaders we were told all our concerns were common, had been expressed

before by others, and had been dealt with. We would counter that our concerns have been dismissed rather than dealt with. Many of the public forums of the Purple Line focused on a particular topic, such as station planning, rather than allowing an opportunity for the average citizen to simply ask, why are we doing this when buses all around us are empty. I remind you of Einstein's definition of insanity "Do the same thing over and over again and expect a different result." I thank you for introducing SF 3859, which would formalize the requirement for cities to have an official say in these projects.

Respectfully,

Gretchen Artig-Swomley
Mayor, Gem Lake