

# Appendix O. Public Involvement



## Public Meeting Summaries

# Northern Lights Express

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## Open House #1 Summary

Prepared for:



Prepared by:

Quandel and Zan Associates



December 2014

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# 1. Public Meeting Overview

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## 1.1 Meeting Format

Four open houses were held for the Northern Lights Express Project in December 2014. The purpose of these open houses was to provide information about the proposed station sites and features in Cambridge, Hinckley and Superior, WI and the proposed light maintenance facility site in Sandstone.

Each meeting was two hours in length and conducted in an open house format with visual display boards. Attendees were provided with the opportunity to submit written comments. Staff people from the Minnesota Department of Transportation, the Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance, cities and consultants were available to answer questions.

## 1.2 Attendance

There were 142 total attendees at the first round of open houses. Open house and attendee information are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1 – Open House Attendance**

Date/Time	Location	Attendance*
December 4, 2014 4:30 – 6:30 p.m.	Superior Library <i>Superior, WI</i>	32; 2 media
December 8, 2014 4:30 – 6:30 p.m.	Sandstone Senior Center <i>Sandstone, MN</i>	14; 1 media
December 9, 2014 5 – 7 p.m.	Cambridge City Center Mall <i>Cambridge, MN</i>	41; 1 media
December 10, 2014 4:30 – 6:30 p.m.	Hinckley Finlayson High School <i>Hinckley, MN</i>	49; 2 media

\*Attendance figures based on participants who signed in and does not include staff.

## 1.3 Notification

Notification of the open houses was provided on the NLX website and through the project email list. In addition, an open house announcement was sent out to individual stakeholders in each area, which included representatives of cities, counties, chambers of commerce, local organizations and media outlets. Television media outlets that picked up the story included WIDO, WCCO, and Northland News Center, while newspaper outlets included the Superior Telegram, Isanti County News, Duluth News Tribune, and Pine County Pioneer. Web outlets that covered the open house include Progressive Railroading and Rick Kupchella’s Bring Me the News. All stakeholders were encouraged to forward the open house notice and to post it on their agency’s/organization’s website and social media sites.

## 1.4 Information Presented

The boards presented at the open houses explained the purpose of the meeting and clarified the planning and design process for NLX station, layover, and maintenance facility sites. The boards also informed attendees about how they could learn, understand, and contribute more to the planning process by providing their feedback.

The general boards illustrated proposed facility site locations, the design process, including where the project currently stands in the process, and an overview explaining the basics of what NLX stands for, who is implementing it, its purpose and its timeline. Photographs were available which illustrated the basic program elements for the station facilities (buildings, platforms, ticketing and waiting areas, parking and multi-modal access), maintenance facility (maintenance bays and workshop, train wash and support functions) and layover facilities (yard tracks).

Boards created for the individual open house locations showed a working concept for proposed stations in closer detail and offered an evaluation criteria for the proposed site alternatives; including, site ownership and control, site size and configuration, internal site access and circulation, local/regional transportation connectivity, physical constraints, railroad operations, environmental impact and consistency with local plans and development goals.

A handout which summarized the board information specific to each open house was available as a take-away to open house participants.

All open house boards and handouts are available on the project website: [www.mndot.gov/nlx](http://www.mndot.gov/nlx).

## 1.5 Next Steps

The concept designs shown at the open houses were intended to be intermediate products, allowing the public to comment on the locations and station elements. Two potential station sites were shown for Cambridge, Hinckley and Superior. One site was provided for a potential light maintenance facility in Sandstone. Over the next few months, one of the two station sites in Cambridge, Hinckley and Superior and the one site in Sandstone will be advanced for further consideration and preliminary design. An updated concept design will be brought back to the public in summer 2015.

## 2. Summary of Comments

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Open house attendees were provided with a comment sheet to submit feedback. Cambridge, Hinckley and Superior attendees filled out a comment sheet geared toward station site preference. Sandstone attendees filled out a comment sheet to discuss the potential light maintenance facility.

In general feedback received at the open houses reflected support of the NLX Project. At the open houses in Superior and Cambridge, some attendees expressed opposition to the project. However, at the open house in Hinckley, the majority of attendees expressed opposition to the NLX Project.

Review of the comments received at the meeting and expressed in written comments found several common themes:

### **Cambridge**

- A significant preference for the City Center Mall site; citing convenience, parking availability, proximity to downtown and residences and economic growth in the city as their primary reasons.
- Generally positive that the increased traffic through the center of Cambridge would be a boon to local businesses and homeowners,
- A few expressed reservations about the impact of raised rents, taxation, and traffic impacts.

### **Hinckley**

- A split between the Southwest and Downtown sites, with quick freeway access as a benefit to the Southwest site, while the Downtown site would better benefit local businesses and re/development.
- A positive attitude toward increased business at the casino and other locations, and a desire for easy transit to the Twin Cities.
- There were also concerns about security.
- Negativity about the cost of the project and the project in general.

### **Superior**

- General preference in Superior fell to the downtown site, citing shorter distance for Duluth commuters, central location, local economic growth, and increased usage due to better visibility.
- Positive attitude towards economic invigoration of the downtown site, with jobs coming from redevelopment and increased visitors.
- Additional transit options to the Twin Cities was also cited as a positive benefit.
- General comments reflected very positive encouragement and enthusiasm for the project, with some concern over the funding priorities.

### **Sandstone**

- Support for a maintenance facility was overwhelmingly positive, citing a desire for the economic boon of local employment.

## 2.1 Cambridge, Hinckley, Superior

Below is a compilation of the written comments received from the comment sheets at each open house. The comments are divided into the questions that were asked on the comment sheet:

- Of the two potential station sites, which do you prefer?
- Do you anticipate any potential impacts to or benefits for your community with either site?
- What station amenities are important to you?
- General comments.

### 2.1.1 Cambridge

Below are the written comments from the 13 comment sheets received at the Cambridge open house.

#### 2.1.1.1 Of the two potential station sites, which do you prefer?

- City Center Mall: it's more convenient.
- City Center Mall: because it is better located than the other for the ease of use for the citizens.
- City Center Mall: as an existing business in the mall, having the site close to our business (and the other local businesses) is good for the economic growth of the area. It encourages people to visit the local city; where the site on the south side of town only makes Cambridge a "pass through" stop.
- City Center Mall: located in downtown, building and parking are in place and easy access. The task force and city council support this location.
- City Center Mall: it is much closer to existing businesses and the area offers much to passengers over the alternative.
- City Center Mall: There is more to do in that location. Shopping Center just seems right.
- City Center Mall: cost should be lower since no acquisition is necessary.
- I like the City Center Mall because it is downtown, the building and plans are here and parking is good. We have purchased additional property if more parking is needed. It will bring more traffic to our downtown businesses.
- In town, if it doesn't present a traffic issue.
- City Center Mall (2).
- No to Ritchart. Yes to Baptist Church. If we have to, City Center Mall.
- I prefer the Baptist church site. If not, then the City Center Mall.

### **2.1.1.2 Do you anticipate any potential impacts to or benefits for your community with either site?**

- Having more people come through the heart of Cambridge can encourage more growth than being located away from any business or entertainment establishments.
- Positive for downtown.
- I think passengers may frequently visit local businesses and add to the local economy if at the City Center Mall.
- Growth, increase in value of housing and benefits to businesses.
- By upgrading the rail tracks, it will be safer. Having the ability to travel to Duluth without having to take your own vehicle; reducing traffic up and down I-35.
- More people will visit Cambridge.
- Yes.
- It is too bad that the tracks are on Highway 95 because of traffic issue. It would be nice to have an over/underpass.
- Yes, more frustration for daily travel. At least 24 trains/day, more frequent detours north or south to cross thru Cambridge WITHOUT changes to the detours to handle the traffic. I.e. keep cars moving.
- Rent may increase in City Center Mall, prompting us to relocate to another area in town.
- The Ritchart site is too far from downtown. We need to keep it downtown for both NLX and commuter rail.
- Concerned that Cambridge residents/property owners will be taxed more to fund this project.
- The location of the station near downtown will reinvigorate the area, and is the quintessence of a walkable community that cuts down on automobile reliance.
- The mall would be reinvigorated by the foot traffic that would walk past the new stores next the projected platform.

### **2.1.1.3 What station amenities are important to you?**

- Clean, friendly, warming station.
- Ample parking, cleanliness, WIFI access, adequate comfortable seating for waiting.
- Restrooms, shelter from the cold.
- Restrooms, heated shelter area.
- The area surrounding the city at the location.
- Heat and air conditioning, enough seating, WIFI, vending or concessions.
- Warm in winter, cool in the summer.

- Coffee shop, center for the arts, bookstore, grocery store, good parking, central location.
- Warming shelter for our cold winter.
- Clean, safe, efficient from parking, platform.
- Restrooms, one or two retail spaces.

#### 2.1.1.4 General Comments

- In addition to being a local business owner, I also commute to the northern metro for my regular job and anticipate utilizing the service personally, in addition to seeing the benefits it provides for people attending events that we hold.
- I would love passenger rail service to both Duluth and Minneapolis. When I lived in St. Cloud, I rode the North Star on occasion and had a great experience.
- I think highest and best use for City Center Mall would be something more like the USDA/office space at the north end of the mall. It's not good retail space, and even though it will probably get a little better if it's also a depot, it still will be a 1960's style mall with loading dock on backside and, most likely, oddly configured retail space on the inside.
- I would like to ride it tomorrow but might have to wait.
- Please make sure there is enough room for bikes on the train!
- Thank you for your help.
- I was on depot location task force and strongly feel that no decision was ever reached. I've simply discontinued meeting because the environmental study and other factors were delaying any need for action. Further, I was very active in Cambridge Business Development Corporation meetings and discussions and have reviewed all of the minutes and no decision or specific site recommendation were ever reached.

## 2.1.2 Hinckley

Below are the written comments from the 8 comment sheets received at the Hinckley open house. One additional comment sheet was received via mail after the open house.

### 2.1.2.1 Of the two potential station sites, which do you prefer?

- Downtown site: fewer traffic problems in the area.
- Downtown: to possibly bring more people and interest to Hinckley's downtown area.
- Southwest Site.
- Southwest: closer to the highway.
- Who picked these spots? Maybe put in a monorail.

### **2.1.2.2 Do you anticipate any potential impacts to or benefits for your community with either site?**

- Casino will do more business.
- Easy trip to games, airport, and Mall of America.
- Increased economic activity in the area (especially at the casino).
- Not a lot. But anything right now would help.
- More access to cities.
- Look at all the riff-raff that will show up!

### **2.1.2.3 What station amenities are important to you?**

- Line to call casino for a ride, snacks, easy parking.
- Just a basic indoor waiting area.
- Indoor waiting, bathrooms and coffee shops.
- Possible jobs for locals.

### **2.1.2.4 General Comments**

- I'd like to see light rail in the future run by the freeway area.
- Hope funding can be found for the project.
- Need to plan more stations. Have one in Braham and Andover.
- How much money do we have to spend before the project is scrapped?
- High-speed rail is not needed. We don't have the money for it. The federal government is broke (18 trillion in debt). State government has no money for it.
- If it is for the casino, let the casino pay for it. It is going to the casino door. Taxpayers do not have the money for it! The casino is buying up property at each end of the line and at stops along the way. The casino takes in millions of dollars per day. They have the money to build and operate this all by themselves. Pine County does not need a financial liability. Anoka built a train which cost them \$17 million in 2012. They took in \$3 million in ticket sales. That left \$14 million that the tax payers had to pay for. It is going to be another Amtrak regardless how fast it goes!
- If this was such a good deal, the railroad company would do it. How many roads will close, will you be building new tracks, how come no survey was given to the people of Hinckley?
- I would like to see the dollars wasted on this project come to an end.

## 2.1.3 Superior

Below are the written comments from the 13 comment sheets received at the Hinckley open house.

### 2.1.3.1 Of the two potential station sites, which do you prefer?

- Downtown is more beneficial, as it can be a shorter drive for those living in Duluth.
- Downtown: more visible = more usage. Closer to transportation infrastructure. Redevelopment of ex. urban lot.
- Downtown: more benefits for the entire community – will highlight Downtown Superior.
- Downtown: more potential for growth.
- Downtown: Better connections to existing businesses. Closer to Bong Bridge. People from Duluth will drive to Superior rather than drive to downtown Duluth.
- Downtown: close to bridges.
- Downtown: More centrally located. Easily connects to all DTA routes into and out of Superior. (Routes 16 and 17).
- Downtown: It is more accessible and is closer to other places downtown that I, or others, would want to get to.
- Downtown: It will land passengers in the area with best access to other transport and commerce.
- Downtown: This is closer to public, buses, taxis, and is within easy walking distance of downtown shops and the government center.
- Downtown: This is near the bus line & commercial & retail area, also more central to the main roadways to the population centers.
- I like both of them – the south site would probably be easier for people to find and would be convenient for people coming over from Duluth as well. Very good for downtown businesses at the south site.
- Next to Aces.
- 30th Street.
- The south site only because it is within walking distance from my home.
- 14<sup>th</sup> Street: Too much traffic on 28<sup>th</sup> Street already.
- Neither.

### 2.1.3.2 Do you anticipate any potential impacts to or benefits for your community with either site?

- Much cheaper, safer, and efficient travel to Minneapolis/St. Paul, as well as potential local transit having much more options.
- Many benefits if the downtown site is selected. Redevelopment is likely the biggest benefit. The current tenant/use is an eyesore.
- Yes, elevated employment and more visitors to our town.

- Help downtown Superior.
- Yes, easier on 30<sup>th</sup> Street for people to park and more room for whatever has to be done with the construction. Easier to put more construction in if need to.
- Beneficial - will provide alternative to get to cities.
- Make this a transportation hub with taxi stand, car rental, and bus connections.
- The train will be AWESOME for Superior! The residents will support you totally! The south site makes the most sense and would give a boost to the downtown of Superior. Ease of travel on main thru ways is a plus!
- Does the south site impact wetland? The benefit would be restored rail service to Minneapolis/St. Paul.
- Greater ability to get tasks and business done with downtown site. South site may strand passengers in a more automotive-oriented district with fewer transport options.
- Being able to develop tourism w/visitors having easy access to Superior. Example: vans picking people up in Superior and taking them to canoe/kayak the Brule River.
- Most of our “smokestack” industries are gone. Tourism is increasingly important as is the service industry, public service, and aging services.

#### **2.1.3.3 What station amenities are important to you?**

- College discount, cheap long term parking.
- On public transportation routes, lots of surface parking.
- Parking. In waiting area: security.
- Security for cars. Station attendants for older people. Medical facility in case. Potential for many people traveling.
- Small shelter, security, vending machines, restrooms.
- Plenty of free parking (long and short term).
- ATM, bus service, cab service, comfortable chairs for waiting, friendly and courteous staff, clean restrooms.
- Safety, clean and good signage.
- Parking, restrooms, news stand, ATM, coffee shop. Other shops not really necessary.
- Parking.
- Direct connection with Amtrak in Twin Cities.
- Public telephone, bathrooms, Wi-Fi.
- Waiting area, bathroom.
- Historical displays (where rail meets sail). An emphasis on the natural features of our area, retail that focuses on the products of Northern Wisconsin and Minnesota.

#### 2.1.3.4 General Comments

- This is great, keep up the hard work!
- I support the NLX project.
- I support this project.
- Great project involving people between major cities. Gas saving – great!
- We can only hope.
- Can't wait to see this happen! Good job for all of your hard work!
- When I was a kid, the train was so convenient for day shopping, for weekend commuting, for airport connections. I'd love to see it come back.
- Need to weigh the cost vs. benefits – I am sure that has been considered – still not convinced how viable; the project needs to be a hub for other transportation.
- Show what conditions would be like in the winter, not the summer. Driving on ice and snow could be your best promotion.
- There is no way any federal monies will be spent on this project. That opportunity ended in 2010 after Democrats were sent packing.
- I generally feel that local rail authorities are competing with Amtrak for scarce federal dollars. Double tracking is essential when sharing track with freight. Reduce the number of stops to make faster trip.
- The Hinckley Loop is unnecessary since the casino should be responsible for providing shuttle which they already operate for patrons.
- It is nice and better to have the train station so that one can do other things while waiting to be picked up. It is also much easier for people visiting the area to get around. It is better for the train station to be in the active part of town and not stuck away in a far corner. Think of those wonderful European cities and the easy access of walking off the train and into the city proper.
- This is a good idea with great potential for improving our travel options in Superior. I hope the project moves forward quickly.
- Great idea! Strongly support it!
- This project has an opportunity to provide fun transportation with a much valued connection with the past, present, and future. Plus let's also consider futuristic technology.

## 2.2 Sandstone

Below is a compilation of the written comments received from the comment sheets at the Sandstone open house. Six comments sheets were turned in at the open house and one comment sheet was received via mail after the open house. The comments are in response to the one question that was asked on the comment sheet:

- What comments do you have regarding a potential maintenance and/or layover facility? Do you anticipate and potential impacts to, or benefits for your community?

### 2.2.1 What comments do you have regarding a potential maintenance and/or layover facility? Do you anticipate and potential impacts to, or benefits for your community?

- I strongly support the City of Sandstone as a site for the maintenance/layover facility. This city is on the move – new hospital, new and active art center, Robinson Park – the city is eager to work with MnDOT on this project. The primary impact of the facility would be economic.
- In an area that has chronic underdevelopment, the jobs created would have a huge impact.
- The benefits could be huge – people who work in the cities or Duluth but live in this area could cut commute time in half. To be able to travel either direction without dealing with traffic, parking, etc. would be such a plus! Job creation.
- This would be great for the community. I question if it would be used enough to support itself, but if you are going to spend the money, you might as well spend it here.

## 2.3 Staff Comments

The following comments were gathered and recorded by NLX staff at the open houses.

### 2.3.1 Cambridge.

- Several participants had concerns about train traffic impacts on the community. The existing freight traffic blocks traffic along Highway 95, which is a main thoroughfare through the community. Stan Gustafson from the City of Cambridge spoke with some participants about how the city and MnDOT are working with BNSF to reduce freight/vehicle traffic conflicts.
- Participants were interested in commuter service between Cambridge and Minneapolis, as many Cambridge residents are employed in the Twin Cities.
- Some participants liked the idea of having the station at City Center Mall since it is near other local activity generators, but some participants were concerned about the site's challenges, such as availability of parking; integrating the station with other City Center Mall uses; and potentially increasing traffic along Highway 95.
- Some participants requested the gates on Highway 95 be closed for a minimal amount of time to not impede traffic, as freight traffic has increased recently in this area causing congestion.
- Some participants felt that the Ritchart site would function better than City Center Mall because it has ample space for parking and may have fewer traffic impacts; while other participants felt that the site was located too far to the south away from the downtown.
- A few participants expressed support for station locations not under consideration.

### 2.3.2 Hinckley

- In general, participants in Hinckley were concerned about public expenditures for passenger rail transportation.
- Some participants felt NLX would not be used and the cost of train fares would be prohibitive for residents. Other participants were supportive of NLX and felt that a station in Hinckley would benefit the community.
- Some participants asked questions about ridership methodology and the types of information that are considered to develop ridership estimates.
- Several participants were concerned about the potential Hinckley Loop Study; specifically, property impacts and impacts to farm fields; a few of the potentially affected property owners were at the meeting; some participants stated that public funds should not be spent on directly serving the casino.
- Some participants mentioned a concern about increased traffic on Main Street and First Street.
- Some participants believed the station traffic and parking would conflict with students arriving and leaving school.

- Some participants were concerned about the grade change and the distance between the north end of the parking lot and the station building.
- A downtown station location is the best choice because it will help bring some traffic to the downtown area.
- The mayor of Hinckley said the city purchased a new recreation site and plans to transfer the LAWCON designation of the Pit site to the new site. This would allow a portion of the Pit to be used for station purposes if necessary.
- Local officials indicated an opportunity to explore using the city-owned lot to the north of the downtown station for station purposes.

### 2.3.3 Superior

- Some participants were concerned that the travel times between Superior and Duluth will be too long and impact the overall travel times of the service.
- Some participants were concerned that the cost of the needed track upgrades between Superior and Duluth would be too costly.
- Participants recognized that the Superior station will need extra parking because some Duluth area residents/employees may use the Superior station instead of the Duluth station due to the travel times between Duluth and Superior by train and the potentially free parking in Superior.
- Long-term secured parking was desired for Superior.
- Both station locations were well accepted, and welcomed if solely by the idea of having an NLX station.
- In general, participants recognized the benefits of having a station in Superior, especially to nearby businesses and employers. For these reasons, some participants expressed a preference for a downtown station site.
- Local streets are narrow; recommend looking at turning radii for city and regional buses, factoring in the allowed parking on both sides of some streets.

### 2.3.4 Sandstone

- Both facilities were welcomed, 'good' jobs being a main benefit.
- Building the platform with the maintenance and/or layover facility was welcomed.
- Recommendation to change the name of the header on the boards, as none of the locals recognize their street as Oak Street. Recommendation was Main Street, or 'just Main'.
- Existing site conditions were described, including utilities, the remediated hazmat site, current junk yard, the deep wells on the north end of the project to be filled to eliminate contamination, and site drainage.
- It was noted that the boundaries of the project could be narrowed, as to not affect the more challenging ends of the site, including the wells and narrow right of way.

# Northern Lights Express

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## Open House #2 Summary

Prepared for:



Prepared by:

Quandel Consultants and Zan Associates



March 2016

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# 1. Public Meeting Overview

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## 1.1 Meeting Format

Four open houses were held for the Northern Lights Express Project in February and March 2016. The purpose of these open houses was to present an update on the NLX Project including selected station and maintenance facility sites and potential layover sites, and served to kick off the Tier 2 Project Level environmental review phase.

The locations of the meetings were selected based on the future NLX station locations and the desire to provide information and receive feedback from residents and businesses in the surrounding area of each station. A meeting location in Fridley, MN was selected to attract potential users of Target Field Station and Coon Rapids Station. The meeting in Duluth, MN served to attract Duluth and Superior, WI riders. Additional meetings were held in Cambridge, MN and Hinckley, MN.

Each meeting was two hours in length and conducted in an open house format with visual display boards. Attendees were provided with the opportunity to submit written comments. Staff from the Minnesota Department of Transportation, the Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance, cities and project consultants were available to answer questions.

## 1.2 Attendance

There were 119 total attendees at the second round of open houses. Open house and attendee information are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1 – Open House Attendance**

Date/Time	Location	Attendance*
February 24, 2016 6 – 8 p.m.	Fridley Community Center <i>Fridley, MN</i>	33; 1 media
February 25, 2016 6 – 8 p.m.	Duluth Depot <i>Duluth, MN</i>	18; 3 media
February 29, 2016 6 – 8 p.m.	Cambridge City Center Mall <i>Cambridge, MN</i>	44; 0 media
March 3, 2016 6 – 8 p.m.	Hinckley Finlayson High School <i>Hinckley, MN</i>	24; 0 media

\*Attendance figures based on participants who signed in and does not include staff.

## 1.3 Notification

Notification of the open houses was provided on the NLX website, through the project email list, and through the Alliance website and email list. In addition, an open house announcement was sent to individual stakeholders in each station area, which included representatives of cities, counties, chambers of commerce, local organizations and media outlets. All stakeholders were

encouraged to forward the open house notice and to post it on agency/organization websites and social media sites. Television media outlets that covered the story included WDIO, KSTP, and Fox 21. Newspaper outlets included the Superior Telegram, Isanti County News, Duluth News Tribune, and Pine County Pioneer. Web outlets that covered the story included Prairie Business Magazine and Trains Magazine.

## 1.4 Information Presented

The boards presented at the open houses explained the purpose of the meeting and clarified the planning and design process for NLX station, layover, and maintenance facility sites. The boards also informed attendees about how they could learn, understand, and contribute more to the planning process by providing their feedback.

The general boards illustrated proposed facility and station site location plans, the design process, including the current project status, and an overview explaining the basics of NLX, who is implementing it, its purpose and its implementation timeline. Photographs illustrated the basic program elements for the station facilities (buildings, platforms, ticketing and waiting areas, parking and multi-modal access), maintenance facility (maintenance bays and workshop, train wash and support functions), and layover facilities (yard tracks). In addition, a board was presented that showed historic properties in the NLX project corridor.

Boards created for the open houses in Cambridge and Hinckley showed proposed stations in more detail.

Four handouts were provided: a summary of the board information, a project overview, frequently asked questions, and one that showed each station design concept layout. These handouts were available as a take-away to meeting attendees.

All open house boards and handouts are available on the project website: [www.mndot.gov/nlx](http://www.mndot.gov/nlx).

## 1.5 Next Steps

Over the next year, the team will complete the analysis and prepare the Tier 2 Project Level Environmental Assessment (EA). Successful completion of the Tier 2 EA will position the NLX Project to receive funding for final design and construction.

## 2. Summary of Comments

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Open house attendees were provided with a comment sheet to submit general feedback about the project.

In general, feedback received at the open houses reflects support of the NLX Project. However, at the open house in Hinckley, there was mixed support for the NLX Project.

Review of the comments received at the meeting found several common themes:

### **Fridley**

- Support for the NLX project and a hope for it to be constructed sooner rather than later
- An emphasis on keeping the train trip no longer than 2½ hours with potential for increasing the speed and shortening the trip duration in the future
- An emphasis on keeping ticket prices low to maintain high ridership

### **Duluth**

- Support for the NLX project
- A desire for evening/weekend trains to support entertainment in the cities
- Concern over the Superior station aesthetics

### **Cambridge**

- Support for the NLX project
- Some reservations about property acquisition, vibration, and traffic congestion
- Concern expressed about potential rail crossing closures
- Some concern with the project funding impacting taxpayers

### **Hinckley**

- Mixed support of the NLX project
- Overall agreement to discontinue the Hinckley Loop alternative

### 2.1 Comment Sheets

The comments below are a compilation of the written comments received from the comment sheets at each open house. Table 2 indicates the number of comment sheets submitted at each open house.

**Table 2 – Comment Sheets Submitted**

Location	Number of Comment Sheets
Fridley Community Center	11
Duluth Depot	4
Cambridge City Center Mall	7
Hinckley Finlayson High School	6

### 2.1.1 Fridley Open House Comments

- This project appears to be a well thought out increased use of existing facility with additions bringing both economic development and tourism to stops along the way in addition to the current Duluth tourist trade. I fully support this effort and look forward to being a passenger.
- I think the concept is great and I look forward to being able to ride to Duluth! Will there be a bistro car/bar car? I also think you should/could better highlight the permanent job creation of the project. How much will tickets cost?
- I think this is a great project with many benefits. A couple thoughts: It's important to keep the trip no longer than two hours and 30 minutes to encourage people to use. If it creeps to three hours, people will opt to drive. I suggest future open house in Minneapolis (not suburbs).
- I do support this project, but I do have a concern that other people will be less supportive of the NLX line with its top speed reduced from 110 MPH to 90 MPH. Sure it does make the line less expensive with no significant track upgrades, but now the travel time to go from the Twin Cities to Duluth will be the same if not slightly slower than if it was done by a vehicle on I-35. Ninety MPH is not really "high speed rail" in my eyes compared to the true high speed rail lines in Europe and Japan which are often traveling over 200 MPH. So I would prefer that the 90 MPH speed limit be viewed as a temporary speed limit (lasting 10-15 years) and make a goal of upgrading the line to 125 MPH or more when the support and costs/benefits are good. Otherwise, continue pointing out the positives of what the line will certainly bring (relaxation, increase work productivity, etc.) to make the relatively affordable price (\$500-600 million) a really worthwhile investment. Good Luck!
- The proposed route map with legacy landmarks could have been large and more legible, really had to lean in to read it. From a mobility and development perspective, I hope this happens in my lifetime. I am 31 now and I hope we aren't still talking about it 30 years from now. Best of luck with the analysis and hope to ride when it is built.
- I am not entirely clear on the reasoning behind the potential maintenance facility at Sandstone. End-of-line facilities simply are most logical from a logistical standpoint. Question to answer as this project moves along, will the Coon Rapids/Foley station also serve as a station for Northstar?
- I support NLX. It will serve several communities that need improved public transportation.
- Great plan. I will use this train to Duluth. What can be done to build this quicker?
- Please study the idea of adding one weekend auto-trains to access the huge number of riders for whom Twin Cities to Duluth is just dead time, but for whom there is and will be no other way to reach their destination beyond Duluth except by using their own car. Politically proposing auto-trains round trip to Duluth on weekends can help sell this project. There would be significant benefits getting additional cars off I-35 on Fridays and Saturdays (if possible) and Sundays. Otherwise, NLX will not attract riders who are going north of Duluth. If an NLX that could carry passengers and their cars, like Amtrak's East Coast, an auto-train that attracts 200 unique passenger fares plus 100 automobiles per weekend run, would it be worth the investment? At what patronage level would this idea be worth studying/implementing? The politics of funding NLX will not be easy. Offering weekend auto-trains could add some votes in the legislature, I believe. I am 67. Coming years will see a huge demographic of seniors who can drive the last mile, but don't want to drive the freeway to Duluth!
- I am in strong support of this project. As a college student, I see a lot of trends in my generation. One of those trends is the want/need to drive less. More and more people are trying to find alternative ways to get places. One of those alternatives that people are very interested in again is trains. This route will not only serve college students, but job growth in

small towns too. Development and growth in Minneapolis and Duluth as well. In order for this line to be very successful, it will need to have room to grow. By that, I mean grow by speed. Ninety MPH won't cut it forever. It will also need reasonable ticket prices. Prices around \$40-\$60 (round trip) would be perfect.

### 2.1.2 Duluth Open House Comments

- I travel to Minneapolis about once a month. Sometimes for fun and sometimes to use the airport. I very much support this project to provide rail service to the Twin Cities. If the travel time is as fast as or faster than driving, I will use the service often. Thanks!
- All for it!
- I feel strongly that a train should depart Minneapolis late at night (11pm or so) to allow folks to attend concerts and other night life. Perhaps a Fridley, MN orchestra special. The orchestra might be a partner. I was one of five people on a church committee that met for dinner on a Friday night. We discovered in the course of conversation that all five of us were driving to the cities the next day, most of us for the day. I strongly support this project!
- Being that Superior's stop is a bit off from the downtown in an area that feels like "rail yards," I am most concerned that unattractive aesthetics will reinforce Superior's image problem as the uglier and inferior city of the Twin Ports. That image problem directly affects Superior's ability to attract residents and investment. Although aesthetics is important for every stop, it is most critical for Superior. My other concern would be that there is good pedestrian wayfinding between Superior's station and Tower Avenue that is an intuitive, safe, and attractive pedestrian experience.

### 2.1.3 Cambridge Open House Comments

- Has a study been done on the vibrations in Northern Anoka/ Southern Isanti County? We lived in Anoka proper years ago, about as far from the tracks as we do now in Athens township. Never felt vibrations in Anoka, but our house shakes in Athens. We believe the type of sound and the substrate have a lot to do with that. Anoka has a rockier substrate; whereas, Athens and North Anoka county have more of a swampy/marsh substrate. Also, there are three crossings within three miles of us. We use all three all of the time. Each of them would cut us off from a different town or city if closed.
- When are we going to have the train going thru Cambridge? It is badly needed!
- Wheelchair accessibility, snow removal, security, crime in general
- I am excited to hear about this project. Believe it is needed, but I hope funding can come in ways that don't heavily burden the people of the state. Key points for me: Discounted rates for seniors and students (many travel back and forth for family reasons). Safety in the track system because of the speed of the train. Reasonable travel rates to keep ridership available to all. Sensitivity to historical and environmental issues (well done so far)
- Will there be rental cars available in Duluth? If I take a train to Duluth, I will want to rent a car.
- Please build this... Yesterday!!
- My family fully supports this project. We will ride these trains and connecting trains into the next generation. I think it would be helpful if the NLX trains could connect with future Amtrak trains to St. Paul, Chicago and Fargo, etc. A good future Minneapolis station site would be at BNSF's Minneapolis junction (Harrison Street Wye area). This would have a lot of space for future expansion. It would also speed operations by eliminating the need for back-up movements. There is no room at Target Field! It is vital to secure trackage rights over the BNSF Midway Sub all the way to St. Paul Union Depot and also over the Minnesota Commercial

Railroad and CP Railway as an alternate route to the St. Paul Union Depot. The Minnesota Commercial RR might be willing to offer space for maintenance facilities for both NLX trains and future AMTRAK trains to Chicago and Fargo, ND rather than Sandstone or Duluth.

### 2.1.4 Hinckley Open House Comments

- This proposed train does not serve the residents of Pine County. It will be subsidized more and more each year. Why would anyone give up their own transportation to ride a train that doesn't take them to their final destination? What happened to the actual ridership survey done in 2014? I think it's safe to say the responses couldn't be spun to fit what MnDOT/NLX Alliance wants. Pine County residents tell me they won't go to Target Field or Duluth on a train. This county, poor as it is, will suffer greatly with this proposed project. Why are we or why would we want to take a step backward in transportation? We want our independence. Rail didn't work before. We should not be building trains for the benefit of non-taxpaying businesses.
- I am so excited!! It's about time. We need more public transportation and a train would be such a great start. Thank you, Thank you! Good Luck with this project. It's an answer to many people's dreams.
- My suggestion is to sell "naming rights" or advertising on station facilities or even rail cars themselves as Metro Transit does, as one source of funding. Especially at the Hinckley Station, perhaps Grand Casino might be willing to pay for part or all of the station construction cost if they could place their logo and name on the station, "Hinckley – Grand Casino Station." Hope you can make a deal with Grand Casino and other advertisers.
- This billion-dollar boondoggle should never have made it out of the outhouse it was conceived in and everybody knows it! There is no economic stimulus to be delivered and neither of the cities at each end need it. Small town Minnesota will never see any benefit. As I see it, the plan is to get a basic no frills train/track up and running; then it will be enhanced at a tremendous cost to get it up to the original plan with a dedicated track and casino loop, because the argument will be the train needs it all to survive. Kill it now and it won't need life support! The U.S. Transportation system needs two trillion dollars to get it up to snuff! Eighty thousand bridges need to be replaced! There's economic stimulus that this thing will never haul! What is needed is light rail from St. Paul and Minneapolis to Forest Lake right now, then passenger or light rail can be legged north. This whole project is senseless. This project will be obsolete in ten years because the hyper loop system will make it so!
- No [Hinckley] Loop is necessary on the outside of Hinckley. Station proposed near the school is too tight and close to the school. Really no need for the train going 90 MPH; people will drive. Drive-less cars will be here before the train can be built. Taxpayers can't support this program.
- How are you going to save time on the train when you can drive from the cities to Duluth in 2.5 hours? Fares are going to cost 36 bucks one-way; you can drive for that. Kids don't want to drive, who are you kidding? For the money spent studying the train, we could have put another lane on I-35. What a waste of taxpayer dollars.

## 2.2 Staff Comments

The following comments were gathered and recorded by NLX staff and consultants at the open houses:

### 2.2.1 Fridley

- Questions about how NLX and Northstar Commuter Rail would work together.

- Members of All Aboard Minnesota in attendance noted they were very excited about the project and noted interest in the Duluth station.
- Several attendees asked questions about timing, ticket prices, when service would begin and funding sources.

### 2.2.2 Duluth

- General support for the train and comments about the need for weekend service.
- Multiple attendees expressed eagerness for the train to be up and running.
- Several attendees expressed concern about how riders would be able to get to the Duluth Transit Center from the station and if the tracks can be extended another two blocks.
- Most supported the Depot station location overall.
- A couple attendees asked questions about why the station is at track level; this makes it less accessible.
- Concerns about the long walk from parking lot on the south side of the Depot.
- Concern about the dark and uninviting atmosphere under the 5<sup>th</sup> Street bridge.
- Concern about having enough parking if some had to be removed for track.
- Request to not interfere with the Scenic Railroad service.

### 2.2.3 Cambridge

- Some attendees asked about necessary property acquisition north of the City Center Mall.
- A few attendees expressed concern about the train blocking crossings and causing traffic congestion while it is stopped at the platform.
- Questions about amenities; e.g., if the train would have bike racks.
- General support for the project and in particular support for the station being located at the City Center Mall.
- Concern about vibration from trains; a person who lives half-mile away says her computer monitor in her home vibrates whenever there are passing trains now.
- Multiple attendees expressed concern about closure of rail crossings; residents near the Anoka/Isanti County line say they currently use three crossings that they are worried will be closed and leave them without efficient access.
- Concern that the train will bring in people who want to commit crimes.
- Comment about wanting to get to Union Depot in St. Paul so they can catch the Empire Builder.
- Suggestion to build a station at Minneapolis junction so riders can get off and catch Northstar or Empire Builder.
- Comment that they hope the station will stimulate development in downtown.
- One person works in St. Paul and uses car, bus and train to get there. He is anxious for a station in Cambridge.
- An attendee commented that she had a negative reaction to the price cut announcement in December because she thought that meant the project had been full of fluff originally.
- Several attendees asked questions about ticket prices, time of trip and second tracks not interfering with freight.

- Question from a firefighter on if the parking lot access would be improved.

### 2.2.4 Hinckley

- Mixed support of the project.
- Concern about roadway congestion at crossings.
- Concern about the proximity of the school and student safety.
- Concern about the sources of funding – residents are worried they will have to pay for it or that the state will ask for more money in the future.
- Comment that the scale of the station buildings is too grand and shouldn't be enclosed.
- Local property taxes are going to end up paying for the train. Residents can't afford that.
- Overall comments that NLX would be great for seniors who need to get to Minneapolis or Duluth for medical appointments, but aren't able to drive. Train would at least get riders to the city, although they would still need rides to their final destination.
- Several attendees expressed concern that the casino loop will happen as soon as the train is up and running. Additional comments that the proposed loop route would cut through farms and restrict access.
- Comment that people without internet access don't receive notice about NLX project meetings (scheduled public meetings or cancelled NLX Alliance meetings).

## 3.0 Additional Public Comments Received

In addition to comments received at the four public meetings, three emails and one mailed comment sheet were also submitted in February and March 2016.

- Email #1 was from a couple in Savage who noted they are in support of NLX; however, they are unable to attend the open houses as they are too far away. They would like to see meetings held further south for the next round of open houses so they are more accessible.
- Email #2 was from a resident who used to ride the train to the Twin Cities. He noted he does not see a need for implementing the NLX project.
- Email #3 was from a meeting attendee who noted he was in favor of the NLX project before the speed was reduced to 90 mph. He feels the lower speed makes the line less encouraging to use. He also noted that he feels the Superior station should be removed to save travel time and costs.
- Mailed comment #1 was from an attendee at the Hinckley open house. She noted she strongly supports the NLX project.

# Northern Lights Express

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## Open House #3 Summary

Prepared for:



Prepared by:

Quandel Consultants and Zan Associates



November 2016

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# 1. Open House Overview

## 1.1 Meeting Format

Four open houses were held for the Northern Lights Express Project in October 2016. The purpose of these open houses was to discuss potential changes to railroad grade crossings in the project corridor. Attendees were provided with boards and handouts depicting potential safety improvements and railroad grade crossing treatments. Project staff were also available to provide project updates and answer questions.

The locations of the meetings were selected based on where a majority of railroad grade crossings are located within the project corridor. Meetings were held in Hinckley, Cambridge, and Askov, Minnesota; and Superior, Wisconsin.

Each meeting was two hours in length and conducted in an open house format with visual display boards, maps, and railroad grade crossing plans. Attendees were provided with the opportunity to submit written comments. Staff from the Minnesota Department of Transportation, the Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance, cities and project consultants were available to answer questions.



*Attendees reviewing grade crossing plans at public meeting in Askov, MN*

## 1.2 Attendance

There were 67 total attendees at the open houses. Open house and attendee information is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1 – Open House Attendance**

Date/Time	Location	Attendance*
October 18, 2016 5 – 7 p.m.	Hinckley-Finlayson High School <i>Hinckley, MN</i>	17; 2 media
October 19, 2016 5 – 7 p.m.	Cambridge City Center Mall <i>Cambridge, MN</i>	20; 0 media
October 24, 2016 5 – 7 p.m.	Pine County History Museum <i>Askov, MN</i>	13; 1 media
October 25, 2016 5 – 7 p.m.	Superior Government Center <i>Superior, WI</i>	17; 1 media
	<b>TOTAL</b>	67 attendees; 4 media

*\*Attendance figures based on participants who signed in and does not include staff.*

### 1.3 Notification

Notification of the open houses was provided on the NLX website, through the project email list, MnDOT social media – reaching over 18,000 people – and through the NLX Alliance website, email list, and social media – reaching over 5,000 people. In addition, an open house announcement was sent to individual stakeholders throughout the corridor, which included representatives of cities, counties, chambers of commerce, local organizations and media outlets. All stakeholders were encouraged to forward the open house notice and to post it on agency/organization websites and social media sites. Television media outlets that covered the meetings included WDIO News Channel 10 - Duluth, MN. Newspaper outlets included the PiCK News, Hinckley News, and the Askov American.

### 1.4 Information Presented

At the open houses, information was provided to show all railroad grade crossing locations and the existing conditions of the “critical” railroad grade crossings (those that will need to be upgraded for the project) in the corridor. Maps that identified the railroad grade crossings in the corridor along with plan sheets of the critical railroad grade crossings and potential roadway changes were available for viewing. In addition, graphics and physical models of potential railroad grade crossing treatments (dual gates, dual gates with median and quad gates) were also on display.

General project information was provided via boards including an overview of the project, current status and anticipated schedule. An overview and update on the environmental review process was also available. Station location, preliminary design and general amenities were also displayed for the station(s) relative to the open house location. Description of potential maintenance facility and layover facilities and their locations were also provided.

Handouts provided at the meeting included: a railroad grade crossing treatment overview, frequently asked questions, and a project overview brochure. These handouts were available as a take-away to meeting attendees. Comment sheets were also provided for attendees to leave feedback about the project.

All open house boards and handouts are available on the project website: [www.mndot.gov/nlx](http://www.mndot.gov/nlx).



*Media coverage of public meeting in Superior, WI*

### 1.5 Next Steps

Through the end of 2016, the project team will complete the railroad grade crossing analysis and finish working on preliminary engineering for the roadway plans. Additionally, the draft Tier 2 Project Level Environmental Assessment (EA) document is anticipated to be complete in winter 2016/2017; an opportunity for public comment on the EA will be provided in spring 2017. Successful completion of the Tier 2 EA will position the NLX Project to receive funding for final design and construction.

## 2. Summary of Comments

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Open house attendees were provided with a comment sheet to submit general feedback about the project.

Review of the comments/questions received, through comment sheets and verbally, at the meeting found several common themes including anticipation and support for the implementation of NLX service, questions about anticipated railroad grade crossing closures and impacts, and questions about operations and service.

### 2.1 Written and verbal comments received

The comments below are a compilation of the written comments received from the comment sheets at each open house and verbal comments from attendees heard by staff. Table 2 indicates the number of comment sheets submitted at each open house.

**Table 2 – Comment Sheets Submitted**

Location	Number of Comment Sheets
Hinckley-Finlayson High School	0
Cambridge City Center Mall	3
Pine County History Museum, Askov	4
Superior Government Center	1

#### 2.1.1 Hinckley

- Why was Hinckley selected as a stop for the NLX train?
- The train will only benefit the casino.
- The NLX train will not bring revitalization and growth to Hinckley.
- Can you consider reconfiguring and closing crossings in Nickerson Township?
- Hinckley/Finlayson High School anticipates expanding the building to the north. Will this impact the NLX stop.
- Concern about train stopping on the tracks and blocking traffic.

#### 2.1.2 Cambridge

- Glad that the Hinckley loop will not be added.
- Can see students from Duluth and Minneapolis as riders.
- Look forward to riding the train to Duluth to visit family.
- Family, friends and neighbors all want this.
- Driving on MN-65 during rush hour is one of the best arguments to be made in favor of this service.
- Hoping to see an overview map showing the crossings locations and general idea of the scope of this part of the project.
- How many crossings need to be closed? How many need to be reconfigured? How many are in good condition now?
- Hope that additional round trips will be considered again, especially toward the southern end of the line where a lot of traffic is running in and out of the center of the metro area.

- Very supportive of NLX. I'd love to see it running, especially through Cambridge.
- Buses are more cost effective.
- Who will pay for this project?
- This project has no money, why is it still being looked at?
- My crossing is currently closed and I need it open to access my land.
- 100% against this project.
- Where are you finding people that will ride NLX?
- Do freight train speeds increase with this project?
- Are you closing any crossings?
- What is the frequency of this route?
- Do you know the times for the trains?
- College students (from Cambridge to coon rapids) would benefit from this line.
- How will the schedule of NLX interfere with how many trains currently travel on the tracks?
- Will there be a Bram pedestrian crossing near the park?
- Will there be a fence and how high along the route to keep pedestrians off the tracks?
- What will the speed of train be through Bram?



*Brochure & other materials provided to open house attendees*



*Dual gate with median crossing model*

### 2.1.3 Askov

- Would like to know where the sidings will be?
- Strongly support the concept of NLX. Hope to see it become a reality.
- Don't see any reason for changes. It doesn't benefit us or any people north of Hinckley.
- It doesn't pay for itself in the cities of Minneapolis or St. Paul and it can't support itself here.
- Why put this burden on the tax payers of this whole state?
- Very fine presentation. Hope there are no delays, looking forward to using the NLX!
- When will this train service be implemented?

### 2.1.4 Superior

- Great presentation. Hang in there.
- Are you planning to close any crossings in Wisconsin?
- What will my crossing look like after this project comes through?
- Where will the Superior station be located?

## 2.2 Additional Comments Received

In addition to comments received at the four public meetings, one emailed comment was submitted following the meeting in Askov, Minnesota which noted the following:

- Thanks for the meeting. I was the person at the end of the open house half kidding about a stop around Nickerson or Holyoke in a neutral location. I was thinking of a neutral location along the track where land prices might be lower and costs be kept down. I could see a stop that would have an unmanned ticket kiosk or on-line ticketing. If everything was automated, the train would not even need to stop if no tickets were sold. I realize it would cut into the over-all travel time. FYI, many area residents do commute to Duluth for work. At one point my husband commuted to the Twin Cities although he stayed all week. I am aware that there are people in Askov who commute to the cities. I am not sure any evaluation of those populations were analyzed for the project

## **Newsletters**

# Northern Lights Express

Revised September 2013 Newsletter

To sign-up for newsletters/updates:

[www.mndot.gov/nlx](http://www.mndot.gov/nlx) and click on *Connect with us* in the lower right corner of the home page.

## About NLX

The Northern Lights Express is a proposed high speed intercity passenger rail project to provide rail service between Minneapolis and Duluth. The NLX Project would operate on approximately 155 miles of existing BNSF rail corridor.

The NLX Project is led by the Minnesota Department of Transportation and the Federal Railroad Administration in cooperation with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation and the Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance.

## Federal Railroad Administration Issues a Finding of No Significant Impact for the Tier 1 Service Level Environmental Assessment

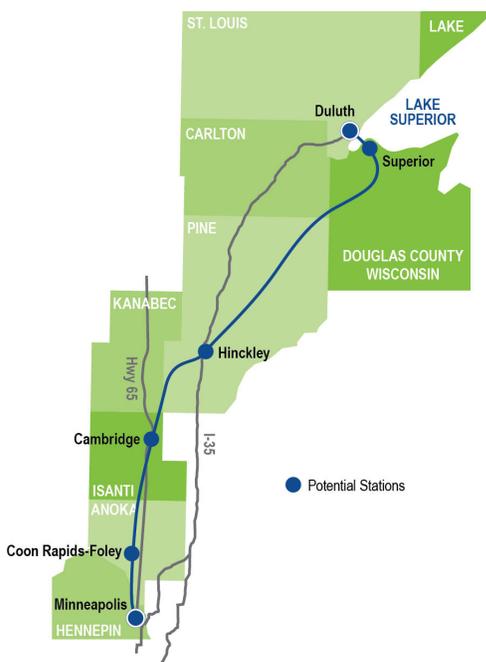
On Aug. 21, the Federal Railroad Administration issued a Finding of No Significant Impact on the Tier 1 Service Level Environmental Assessment for the Northern Lights Express High Speed Intercity Passenger Rail Project between Minneapolis and Duluth, Minnesota. FRA's issuance of a FONSI means that the NLX Project does not have significant environmental impacts and, therefore, will proceed to the preliminary engineering and Tier 2 project level environmental review phase.

The Tier 1 EA examined the 155-mile project corridor relative to social, economic and environmental

impacts. The Tier 1 EA was available for public comment this spring and comments received were taken into consideration by FRA in preparation of, and included in, the FONSI, which is available at [www.fra.dot.gov/Page/P0624](http://www.fra.dot.gov/Page/P0624).

Under the state environmental review process, the Minnesota Department of Transportation, serving as the responsible governmental unit, also issued a Negative Declaration, indicating that a state environmental impact statement is not required. The Negative Declaration is available at [www.mndot.gov/nlx](http://www.mndot.gov/nlx).

## NLX Corridor Map



## Northern Lights Express Project Moves into Preliminary Engineering and Tier 2 Environmental Review

The Northern Lights Express Project is transitioning into the next phase of project development, which includes preliminary engineering and Tier 2 project level environmental review.

Preliminary engineering includes preparing designs for track and signal improvements, required for high speed passenger trains on the BNSF tracks as well as improvements to roadways that cross the tracks either at-grade or over a bridge. Preliminary engineering also includes the identification of sites for stations,

layover facilities and a light maintenance facility.

Tier 2 environmental review will further analyze potential environmental impacts and identify avoidance, minimization and mitigation measures as preliminary engineering advances. Stakeholder involvement and public participation will be scheduled throughout the next phase.

Preliminary engineering and Tier 2 environmental review is scheduled to be completed by the end of 2015.

## Hinckley Loop Study Initiated

The Hinckley Loop Study will examine the feasibility of an alternative alignment for Northern Lights Express service that provides a direct passenger connection from the BNSF mainline to the Grand Casino Hinckley, rather than a station on the BNSF mainline in Hinckley.

The Hinckley Loop Study was prompted by a 2007 feasibility study regarding restoration of intercity passenger rail service between Minneapolis and Duluth. The 2007 study suggested that providing a direct connection to the Grand Casino, east of Hinckley, would add substantial riders and revenue to the overall system. The study projected that overall NLX revenues could increase as much as 36 percent with a direct connection to the Grand Casino Hinckley.

The final study is expected to be completed in fall 2014.

## Federal Railroad Administration and Minnesota Department of Transportation Take Project Lead

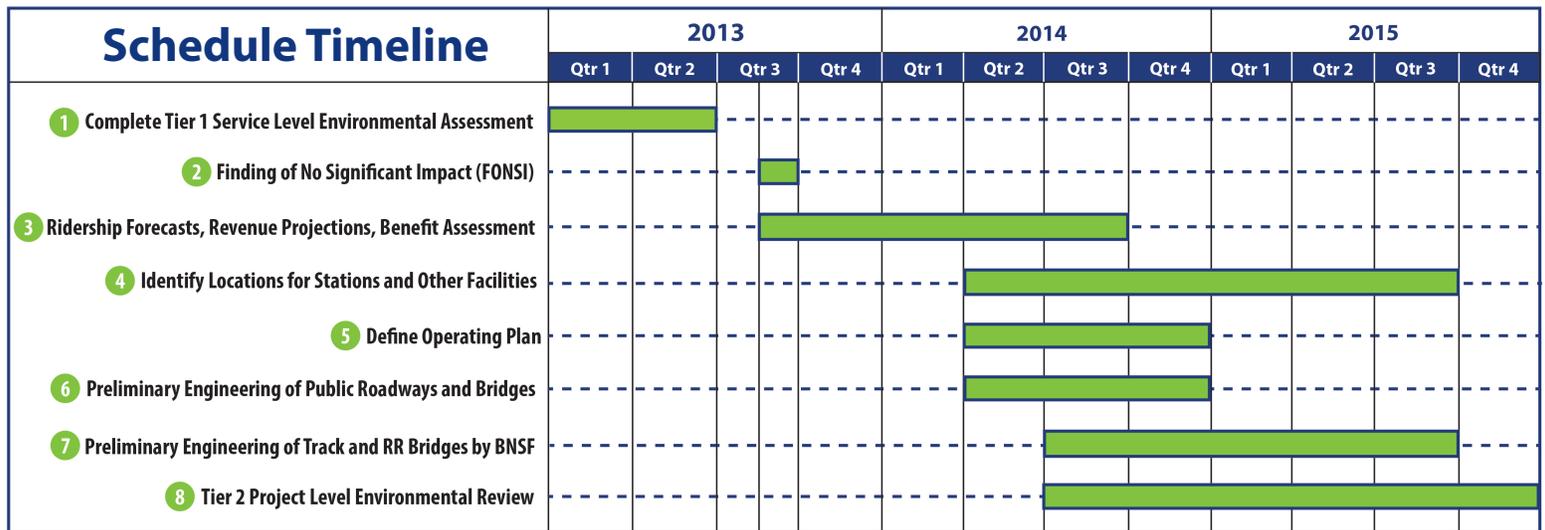
The move into preliminary engineering and Tier 2 project level environmental work initiated changes in management of the Northern Lights Express Project. Since 2007, the Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance, a joint powers board of Minnesota and Wisconsin counties and cities and the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe, has advocated for and advanced the NLX Project. With the completion of the NLX Tier 1 Environmental Assessment, the Minneso-

ta Department of Transportation and the Federal Railroad Administration, in cooperation with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation and the Alliance, will now lead the effort to advance the NLX Project. MnDOT has hired Quandel Consultants, a firm with extensive high speed passenger rail experience, to assist with project management oversight, and coordination of preliminary engineering activities, Tier 2 environmental review and financial planning.

## Financial Planning and Ridership Study to Begin

The Minnesota Department of Transportation is in the process of hiring a consultant to conduct the financial planning and ridership study. Preliminary ridership forecasts are antici-

pated to be available by mid-2014. The financial plan will be finalized when the preliminary engineering and environmental review are complete in late 2015.



The NLX Newsletter is an electronic newsletter published quarterly.

For more information about the project or to sign-up to receive the newsletter/ email updates: [www.mndot.gov/nlx](http://www.mndot.gov/nlx)

To request a hard copy of the newsletter, contact Mary McFarland Brooks: 395 John Ireland Blvd., MS 150 St. Paul MN 55155 [nlx.dot@state.mn.us](mailto:nlx.dot@state.mn.us)



# Railroad Speak: Rail Crossings

## What are rail grade crossings?

Rail grade crossings are locations where a roadway crosses railroad tracks at the same level rather than crossing above or below the tracks. A rail grade crossing can either be on public or private land. Public crossings are roadways under the jurisdiction of a public agency, such as a state, county or city highway/public works department. Private crossings are where the roadway is privately owned; for example, a residential driveway, an access road to an industrial plant or a roadway on farmland.

## How many rail grade crossings are in the NLX Corridor?

In the NLX Corridor, there are 125 public and 44 private rail grade crossings.

## Will the NLX Project impact rail grade crossings?

The rail grade crossings in the existing BNSF corridor were originally designed for freight trains traveling at relatively slow speeds. For passenger trains traveling at speeds up to 90 MPH, like NLX, crossing warning devices, and possibly the roadway, will need to be upgraded to maintain rail, roadway, and pedestrian safety.

## How can rail grade crossings be improved?

Grade crossing improvements depend on the characteristics of the crossing. The most effective grade crossing improvement is to provide grade separation, but this is only practical where traffic volume is high. In the NLX Corridor, grade separation is already in place in most locations with high traffic volumes. MnDOT will also study where a crossing can be closed, but this will only occur where other reasonable routes to cross the tracks are available and access to property can be maintained in some other way.

Other grade crossing improvements include installing warning devices. The NLX Project is considering active warning devices: automatic gate systems, flashing-light signals and advanced warning flashers. These active warning devices along with passive devices, such as signs and pavement markings, help communicate to drivers and pedestrians on how they should react at a grade crossing.

Specific types of grade crossing systems include dual gates with flashers either with or without a non-mountable median and a four-quadrant gates system with gates on both the right and left sides of the road to block the entire roadway. Medians are effective in discouraging motorists from driving around dropped gates.

Dual gates with flashers is the minimum investment being recommended for NLX project crossings. Grade crossing warning devices will be recommended during the Tier 2 Project Level environmental review phase of the project, which will conclude in spring 2017.



Dual gates with flashers



Dual gates with flashers and median

## Agency Spotlight: Wisconsin Department of Transportation

The Wisconsin Department of Transportation focuses on developing and implementing transportation policies, plans, programs and practices throughout the state. WisDOT strives to do this in a sustainable way that respects the environment and stimulates the economy. WisDOT is working in cooperation with the Minnesota Department of Transportation to ensure success in implementing the NLX Project and developing a station in Superior, Wisconsin. The NLX project is working with WisDOT's Northwest Regional office staff, Anna Davey, on all project tasks related to the state of Wisconsin.

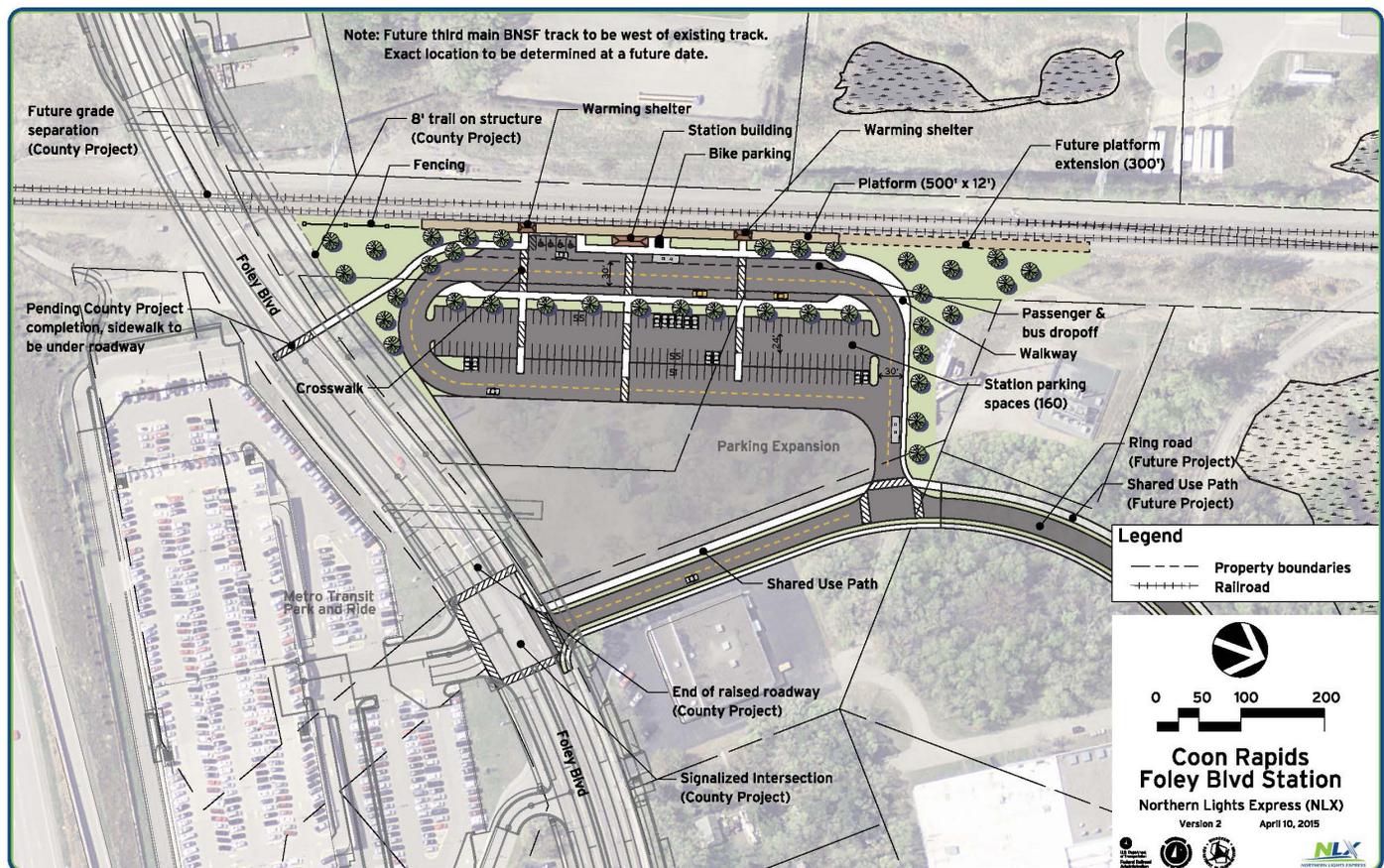
### Schedule Timeline



## Station Spotlight: Coon Rapids

The Coon Rapids station site is located on Foley Boulevard, north of Highway 610, and east of the existing BNSF railroad tracks. The site has convenient local and regional access via Coon Rapids Boulevard, East River Road, and Highway 610. Connection to existing transit service is also readily available as the station is across the street from the Metro Transit Foley Boulevard Park and Ride facility. Developing a passenger rail station in this location is consistent with the city's land use planning and transportation goals identified in the Foley Boulevard Station Area Plan. The station will be built on land owned by the Anoka County Regional Railroad Authority and doesn't require any private property acquisition. Additionally, the site is large enough to accommodate all typical station program elements that will be standard at NLX stations:

- Designed to meet the needs of a modern intercity passenger rail service
- Will meet the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act
- 500-foot-long platform with warming shelters
- Climate controlled station building with passenger waiting area
- On-site ticket kiosk machines
- Short-term and long-term parking
- Multimodal access with efficient passenger, taxi and bus drop-off
- Bicycle parking and connections to area bicycle trails



Conceptual layout of the Coon Rapids station



### Additional Questions or Comments?

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Francis Loetterle, NLX Project Manager  
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 395 John Ireland Blvd., MS 150, St. Paul MN 55155

# Northern Lights Express

February 2016

To sign-up for NLX Project updates:

[www.mndot.gov/nlx](http://www.mndot.gov/nlx) and click on *Connect with us* in the lower right corner of the home page.

## About NLX

The Northern Lights Express is a proposed high speed intercity passenger rail project to provide rail service between Minneapolis and Duluth. The NLX Project would operate on approximately 152 miles of existing BNSF railway track.

The NLX Project is being managed by the Minnesota Department of Transportation in consultation with the Federal Railroad Administration, and with cooperation from the Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance, Wisconsin Department of Transportation, and local communities.



## NLX Project Cuts Costs

During the summer and fall of 2015, the Minnesota Department of Transportation and consultants worked diligently to analyze station and facility site locations, forecast ridership and revenue, and identify an optimal service plan for the Northern Lights Express Project. On December 16, 2015, the Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance, in conjunction with the Minnesota and Wisconsin Departments of Transportation, announced project details.

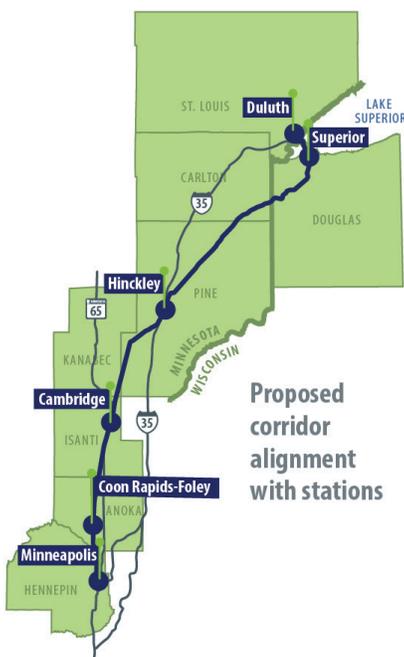
The preliminary estimate of the total cost to implement the Northern Lights Express Project is between \$500 and \$600 million. This includes stations, equipment and the necessary track and roadway grade crossing improvements to provide reliable, daily, high-speed intercity passenger rail service. Previous cost estimates approached \$1 billion dollars.

The NLX passenger rail service will operate on 152 miles of existing BNSF Railway track between Minneapolis and Duluth with an operating plan of four round trips per day at speeds up to 90 miles per hour with an end-to-end travel time of approximately 2 ½ hours.

Projected ridership for the first year of operation, anticipated to be in 2020 if federal funding is available, is estimated in a range of 700,000 to 750,000 annual riders and increasing to 900,000 to 1,000,000 annual riders in 2040. Operating costs are estimated in the range of \$17.5 million per year average for the first five years of operation. Projected revenue from fares is estimated in the range of \$12.8 million per year average for the first five years of operation.

These preliminary project and operating cost estimates will be updated and a final benefit-cost analysis will be prepared upon completion of cost-sharing discussions with BNSF. MnDOT is also proceeding with the completion of preliminary engineering, Tier 2 Project Level environmental review, and a Financial and Implementation Plan. By early 2017, the NLX Project will be shovel-ready, which means the project will be in position to move into final design and construction. Pending availability of federal funding, NLX service could begin as early as 2020.

## NLX Corridor Map



## Upcoming Public Meetings

Public meetings will be held at the end of February/early March.

Attend one of the following public meetings to:

- Hear more about estimated project costs, benefits, ridership and service plan
- Review the station location design concepts
- Learn about the Tier 2 Project Level environmental review phase and next steps
- Talk to project staff, ask questions and provide feedback

### Twin Cities

(Minneapolis/Coon Rapids stations)  
 Wednesday, Feb. 24  
 Fridley Community Center, 6-8 pm  
 6085 7th Street NE, Fridley

### Twin Ports

(Duluth/Superior stations)  
 Thursday, Feb. 25  
 The Depot, 6-8 pm  
 506 Michigan Street West, Duluth

### Cambridge

Monday, Feb. 29  
 City Center, 6-8 pm  
 140 Buchanan Street North, Cambridge

### Hinckley

Thursday, March 3  
 Finlayson High School, 6-8 pm  
 201 Main Street East, Hinckley

## Station Site Locations Selected

The Minnesota Department of Transportation has selected station site locations for the Northern Lights Express Project. On the south end, the Northern Lights Express Project will expand the current Target Field Station in downtown Minneapolis and share it with Northstar Commuter Rail. In Coon Rapids, the station will be located on Foley Boulevard across from the Metro Transit Park and Ride. In Cambridge, a station will be located at the City Center Mall, sharing space with city hall and the fire and police departments. In Superior, the station will be on the north side of Belknap Street, three blocks west of Tower Avenue. In Duluth, a new waiting room and platform will be added to The Depot, which will continue to be utilized by its existing tenants and the North Shore Scenic Railroad. The final location of the Hinckley Loop station has not yet been determined. The location will be finalized by the end of March 2016 with completion of the Hinckley Loop study.

A layover facility is required in Duluth and potentially one other location to park trains overnight. NLX will also require a light maintenance facility to perform routine maintenance and minor repairs. MnDOT will continue to study the potential for a light maintenance facility to service the trains in either Sandstone or Duluth.

With the selection of site locations, preliminary concept designs for each of the stations, maintenance facility and layover facility locations have been prepared and will be presented at the upcoming public meetings. See sidebar for public meeting dates and locations.



## Next Phase of Environmental Work Begins

A Tier 1 Service Level Environmental Assessment, completed in August 2013, evaluated impacts of the project as a whole, compared multiple corridor alternatives, and resulted in the selection of a preferred corridor. Since the completion of the Tier 1 EA, the Minnesota Department of Transportation has prepared an alternatives analysis and concept engineering designs of station, layover and light maintenance facility sites, advanced track and roadway engineering and refined an operating plan to reflect four round trips per day at speeds up to 90 miles per hour.

*Continued on page 3*

## NLX Project

### Schedule Timeline



At this time, the Minnesota Department of Transportation, in consultation with the Federal Railroad Administration and with cooperation from the Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance and Wisconsin Department of Transportation, is initiating the preparation of the Tier 2 Project Level EA on the refined NLX project. The Tier 2 EA will update the Tier 1 impact analyses based on station/facility concept plans, preliminary engineering plans for track infrastructure and grade crossings and the refined operating plan. Preliminary technical findings from the analysis conducted at the proposed station areas will be available for review and discussion at the upcoming public meetings, as well as an overview of the Tier 2 EA process (see sidebar on page 2 for public meeting dates and locations). A completed Tier 2 EA is anticipated to be distributed for public review in the spring of 2017.

## What is High Speed Passenger Rail?

High speed passenger rail is intercity passenger service that connects major population centers and provides service throughout the day. It is an express service with few intermediate stops and operates at top speeds ranging from 90 mph to over 150 miles per hour.

The term high speed passenger rail often evokes images of Japanese Shinkansen 'bullet' trains and the French Train à Grande Vitesse, both of which operate on dedicated national networks at speeds up to 200 mph. Several other nations have high speed intercity rail networks, with speeds exceeding 125 mph; including, Germany, Spain, Italy, Great Britain, China and South Korea.



In the United States, Amtrak's Acela Express achieves speeds up to 150 mph on its Northeast Corridor route between Washington DC, New York City and Boston. Outside of the Northeast Corridor, Amtrak operates intercity passenger trains on track that is shared with freight trains at much lower speeds. However, between Chicago and Detroit and Chicago and St. Louis, Amtrak is already operating trains at speeds up to 110 mph. And, California is proceeding with the development of a high speed passenger service between San Francisco and Los Angeles that will achieve sustained speeds of 200 mph.

In comparison, in the Twin Cities metropolitan area, Northstar is considered a commuter rail, because it operates between a major city and the surrounding suburban area and provides service primarily into the city in the morning and away from the city in the afternoon. Light rail transit, such as the Blue and Green Lines, streetcars and subways are rail services that operate only within a metropolitan area. The Northern Lights Express would be the first high speed intercity passenger rail service in Minnesota.

## NLX Agency Spotlight: Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance

The Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance is a joint powers board formed in 2007 to explore options for renewing passenger rail service on existing tracks in the 152 mile Northern Lights Express Corridor. The Alliance's role is to serve as a critical link between MnDOT/FRA and local governments along the corridor. As the lead organization for the 2007 NLX Feasibility Study and a partner in the preparation of the Tier 1 Service Level EA, the Alliance has been and continues to be an essential advocate for the NLX project. The Alliance continues to help collaboratively discuss, study, plan for, promote and facilitate the development of intercity passenger rail transportation in the NLX Corridor. The Alliance Board is made up of representatives from the St. Louis & Lake Counties Regional Railroad Authority, Isanti County, Hennepin County, City of Minneapolis, City of Duluth and the Mille Lacs Band of Ojibwe. Bob Manzoline, executive director for the Alliance, works closely with the Minnesota Department of Transportation on the NLX Project to ensure all parties are involved and documentation and updates are provided to the Alliance Board.



### Additional Questions or Comments?

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## About NLX

The Northern Lights Express is a proposed high speed intercity passenger rail project to provide rail service between Minneapolis and Duluth. The NLX Project would operate on approximately 152 miles of existing BNSF rail corridor.

The NLX Project is being managed by the Minnesota Department of Transportation in consultation with the Federal Railroad Administration and the Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance, and with cooperation from the Wisconsin Department of Transportation.

## Public Feedback at December Open Houses

Throughout December 2014, the public was invited to the first round of open houses on facility planning for the Northern Lights Express Project. Open houses were held in the cities in which NLX passenger stations are proposed: Cambridge, Hinckley and Superior, Wisconsin. Another open house was held in Sandstone, where a light maintenance facility is proposed. The purpose of the open houses was to provide information about potential station sites and station amenities and request public comment.

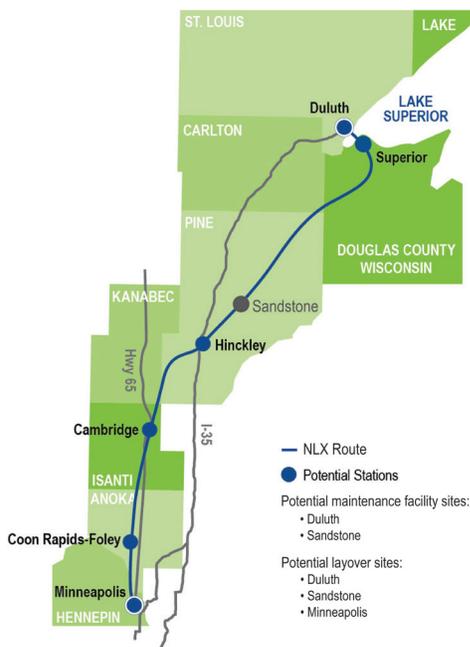
Almost 150 community members and local media attended the open houses and had the opportunity to view informational displays about the design process, as well as the progress and timeline of the NLX project. Of particular interest were the displays illustrating the proposed station site locations and basic station elements. NLX Project staff were available to address questions and concerns and attendees were encouraged to submit written comments.

Participants at the Cambridge meeting expressed a preference for the City Center Mall site, citing the convenient location, parking availability and citywide economic growth as primary reasons for their preference. Most comments regarding the potential increase in vehicle traffic through the center of Cambridge were positive, stating that the increase in traffic would benefit local businesses. A few comments expressed concern about the potential impact of raised rents, taxes and traffic impacts.

Comments at the Hinckley meeting revealed that attendees equally preferred the southwest and downtown sites. The freeway accessibility of the southwest site and the potential for downtown development and increased traffic to local businesses were cited as positives of both sites. Residents expressed a desire for easy travel to the Twin Cities and were positive about increased business in the area. They also had concerns about security at the station, as well as the overall need and cost of the project.

*Continued on page 3*

## NLX Corridor Map



*Open house in Superior, Dec. 4, 2014*



*Open house in Cambridge, Dec. 9, 2014*

## Railroad Speak...

### Do you know who owns the railroads?

Get in your car and get out on the road, any time, any day. Public roads are open to everyone, whether it is an interstate, county or state highway, city street or even a township road. They are all owned and maintained by government agencies and funded by a variety of taxes and tolls.

This is not the case with railroads. Railroads are private companies and railroad tracks are private property, with the use of railroad tracks tightly controlled by the railroad that owns them. Every train requires permission to move on a track from a central dispatcher that coordinates the movements of all trains to ensure that trains operate safely.

Railroads frequently give permission to other private railroads to share their tracks under a trackage rights agreement. But every train still needs authority to travel, and railroads will often give priority to their own trains.

In order for the Northern Lights Express to operate over BNSF tracks, the State of Minnesota must enter into an operating agreement that outlines the number of trains and time of day they operate and other operating characteristics of the proposed NLX service. This agreement will also detail the cost to the state. MnDOT is already discussing these issues with BNSF, to ensure that both BNSF and NLX can share the track and maintain reliable operating schedules.

## The Depot in Duluth: NLX's Northern Terminal

The Northern Lights Express service will use the historic Union Depot in Duluth as its northern terminal. At one time, the station served seven different railroads and accommodated 5,000 passengers per day. As recently as 1985, the station was used by Amtrak. Since 1973, the building has provided space for cultural and arts organizations. Today, the St. Louis County Heritage and Arts Center, Duluth Art Institute, Lake Superior Railroad Museum, St. Louis County Historical Society, Veteran's Memorial Hall and five performing arts organizations are housed within The Depot. It also continues to serve as a train station for the North Shore Scenic Railroad.

The Duluth Depot is also the proposed northern terminal for NLX. In December 2014, the Minnesota Department of Transportation invited representatives from St. Louis County, City of Duluth, Greater Downtown Council of Duluth, Metropolitan Interstate Council, Lake Superior Railroad Museum, Oneida Realty and the Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance to attend a workshop and collaborate on how to incorporate NLX service into The Depot.

This collaboration was successful as representatives put forward ideas for the re-use of the building that complement the historic structure, preserve all of the existing uses and accommodate NLX service. Since the workshop, MnDOT has been preparing station concept plans that upgrade the former Amtrak waiting area to accommodate passengers for NLX and the North Shore Scenic Railroad. MnDOT also plans to add track and a platform for the NLX service which will maintain North Shore Scenic Railroad operations. The completed plan will be available by mid-summer 2015.

## NLX Project

Schedule Timeline	2013				2014				2015				2016	
	Qtr 1	Qtr 2	Qtr 3	Qtr 4	Qtr 1	Qtr 2	Qtr 3	Qtr 4	Qtr 1	Qtr 2	Qtr 3	Qtr 4	Qtr 1	Qtr 2
1 Complete Tier 1 Service Level Environmental Assessment	█													
2 Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)			█											
3 Ridership Forecasts, Revenue Projections, Benefit Assessment			█											
4 Identify Locations for Stations and Other Facilities							█							
5 Define Operating Plan					█									
6 Preliminary Engineering of Public Roadways and Bridges											█			
7 Preliminary Engineering of Track and RR Bridges by BNSF													█	
8 Tier 2 Project Level Environmental Review											█			

## Public Feedback - Continued from page 1

In Superior, participants were generally supportive of the project and favored the downtown site based on its central location and visibility, as well as shorter travel distance for Duluth commuters. Comments supported additional transit options to the Twin Cities; however, some expressed concern over statewide funding priorities.

Finally, there was overwhelming support for the proposed maintenance facility in Sandstone, with residents looking forward to a boost in local employment.

Through these open houses, project staff gained additional insight into the unique opportunities and constraints of the proposed locations, as well as which site is preferred in each community.

A summary of the open houses is available on the project website: [www.mndot.gov/nlx](http://www.mndot.gov/nlx)

## NLX Agency Spotlight: MnDOT

The Minnesota Department of Transportation is the transportation leader in Minnesota. MnDOT's core business is to develop and implement transportation policies, plans, programs and practices. MnDOT strives to do these in a sustainable way that respects the environment and stimulates the economy. MnDOT also works with great partners to ensure success in their areas of transportation-related service, projects and initiatives.

### What is MnDOT's role in the NLX Project?

MnDOT is the lead state agency for the Northern Lights Express Project and works in coordination with the federal lead agency, the Federal Railroad Administration, and in cooperation with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation and the Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance.

### Which MnDOT staff are on the NLX Project?

The NLX Project is coordinated by MnDOT's Passenger Rail Office. MnDOT staff oversee all project management, including consultants, work tasks, reports and budget. Frank Loetterle serves as the NLX Project Manager on behalf of MnDOT.



Open house in Sandstone, Dec. 8, 2014



Open house in Hinckley, Dec. 10, 2014



U.S. Department  
of Transportation  
Federal Railroad  
Administration



## Additional Questions or Comments?

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## About NLX

The Northern Lights Express is a proposed high speed intercity passenger rail project to provide rail service between Minneapolis and Duluth. The NLX Project would operate on approximately 155 miles of existing BNSF rail corridor.

The NLX Project is led by the Minnesota Department of Transportation and the Federal Railroad Administration in cooperation with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation and the Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance.

## Open Houses to Be Held in Station Cities

In the next several weeks, public open houses will be held for the Northern Lights Express Project in Cambridge, Hinckley and Superior, cities where NLX passenger stations are proposed. In addition, an open house will be held in Sandstone, a potential site for a maintenance facility. Open houses in Minneapolis, Coon Rapids and Duluth will be held in 2015. The purpose of the open houses is to provide an opportunity for the station community and other interested parties to receive updates on the project, learn about the proposed station site(s), hear about facilities included in the station building and see how the station site would fit in with the surrounding community. More importantly, the open houses will serve as a way for community members to provide feedback on the proposed stations.

### *Why should you attend a NLX open house?*

If you are a resident or business owner in a city with a proposed station, project staff want to hear your thoughts on the proposed station site(s) and how the proposed station will fit into your community. Throughout the summer, Minnesota Department of Transportation staff met with city staff from each of the cities with a proposed station and discussed possible sites for station locations. The open houses are your opportunity to meet with project staff and provide comments on the proposed station location and on the potential benefits and challenges of the site.

### *How can I learn more about the NLX Project and prepare to attend an open house?*

If you would like more information about the NLX Project prior to attending an open house, visit the project website: [www.mndot.gov/nlx](http://www.mndot.gov/nlx). Staff will be available to answer questions, so bring questions or concerns with you to the open house.

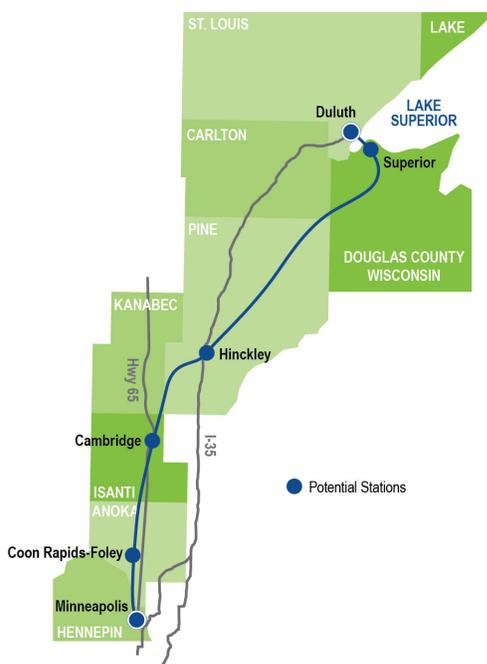
### *When and where are the open houses?*

Locations and dates of the open houses will be announced soon. For updated information on the open houses, continue to check the project website: [www.mndot.gov/nlx](http://www.mndot.gov/nlx).

### *What if I cannot attend an open house?*

If you cannot attend an open house, relevant materials will be posted to the project website after each meeting. Comments and feedback about the NLX Project can be provided at any time to Frank Loetterle, NLX Project Manager, by email at [francis.loetterle@state.mn.us](mailto:francis.loetterle@state.mn.us) and by phone at 651-366-3194.

## NLX Corridor Map



## Railroad Speak...

Ever wonder what some of the railroad track terminology means?

### Main Track or Mainline Track

Track that is used for through trains or is the principal artery of the railroad system from which yards, sidings and spurs are connected. It generally refers to a route between cities or towns.

### Yard

A system of tracks that are arranged in a manner that allows railroads to sort rail cars for assembling into trains as well as to store rail cars until they are needed.

### Siding Track

Track adjacent to a main track to allow a train to overtake and pass another train moving in the same direction or to allow trains moving in opposite directions to meet and move pass one another.

### Spur

A track that extends out from the main track to serve customers shipping or receiving goods by rail.

## Safety: A Top Priority for High Speed Passenger Rail

In his vision to address America's transportation challenges, President Obama has proposed public investment in an efficient high speed rail network connecting communities across the nation. In the effort to create a world-class high-speed rail system, the Federal Railroad Administration has emphasized safety as their primary concern, believing that high speed rail operations in the United States can provide service as safe as, or safer than, any high speed rail operation worldwide.

FRA's goal is uniformly safe passenger rail service, regardless of speed. However, with increased speed comes added safety concerns regarding collisions and train derailments. Accordingly, FRA has adapted their safety regulations and established safety standards across the board, applying these standards to address safety concerns on passenger rail lines to ensure that railroads involved in passenger operations are trained to manage emergencies effectively and efficiently.

Safety is a top priority for the Northern Lights Express Project and is a consideration in all aspects of the project. Upcoming newsletters will include more information about how the NLX Project will address safety along the corridor.



Station building example: Sturtevant, WI



Station platform example: Glenview, IL

## NLX Project

Schedule Timeline	2013				2014				2015			
	Qtr 1	Qtr 2	Qtr 3	Qtr 4	Qtr 1	Qtr 2	Qtr 3	Qtr 4	Qtr 1	Qtr 2	Qtr 3	Qtr 4
1 Complete Tier 1 Service Level Environmental Assessment	█											
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4 Identify Locations for Stations and Other Facilities							█					
5 Define Operating Plan					█							
6 Preliminary Engineering of Public Roadways and Bridges							█					
7 Preliminary Engineering of Track and RR Bridges by BNSF								█				
8 Tier 2 Project Level Environmental Review								█ Through early 2016 →				

# Federal Railroad Administration: Moving America Forward

It takes the work of many coordinated agencies and stakeholders to bring a rail project from dream to reality. The Northern Lights Express Project is moving forward in collaboration with the Minnesota Department of Transportation, the Federal Railroad Administration, the Wisconsin Department of Transportation, the NLX Alliance and other local stakeholders. In this newsletter and in upcoming issues, watch for highlights of NLX Project agencies and stakeholders. This issue features the FRA and their project participation.

The FRA was created by the Department of Transportation Act of 1966 with a mission to “enable the safe, reliable, and efficient movement of people and goods for a strong America, now and in the future”. Today, FRA regulates over 760 railroads, with a focus on transporting passengers and goods as safely as possible. FRA’s activities have made the past ten years one of the safest in rail transportation history and they’re continuing to develop new initiatives to improve passenger rail technology, develop rail corridors and enhance safety now and in the future.

FRA is the lead federal agency on the NLX Project and provides guidance and oversight in accordance with federal regulations.

## NLX Project on the Summer Event Circuit

“Is this train project ever going to happen?” That was the number one question heard at Northern Lights Express information booths at nine community events attended by nearly 100,000 people over the summer months. Other questions received at these events focused more on the cost of an individual NLX ticket rather than on the total cost of the project. Staff at the NLX booths heard a lot of enthusiasm for the train at the events, including county fairs in Isanti, Pine and Douglas; farmers markets in Duluth and Minneapolis; and community festivals along the corridor.



The NLX Alliance display was seen at nine events over the summer, including one in Sandstone for ice climbers.



Look who's talking tomatoes, turnips and trains at the Minneapolis Farmers Market in Sept: Sandstone Council Member Len Bonander, staffing the NLX Alliance booth, said people want to know if and when the train project will happen.



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The NLX Project is led by the Minnesota Department of Transportation and the Federal Railroad Administration in cooperation with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation and the Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance.

***"Multi-modal transportation is important to the vitality of the communities along the NLX corridor. The goal for our data-driven process is to get to a shovel-ready stage in 2016 so our communities will be in position to benefit from federal rail investments."***

*- St. Louis County Commissioner Steve Raukar, chair of the NLX Alliance.*

## Where will NLX Stations Be Located?

The Minnesota Department of Transportation has begun discussing station locations with communities along the Northern Lights Express corridor. In Minneapolis, NLX passengers will board and disembark at Target Field Station. In Duluth, trains will arrive and leave at or near the Duluth Depot. At both of these terminals, a layover facility will be provided to allow at least one train to spend the night, and be cleaned and inspected for the next day's service.

Although potential sites were identified in the Tier 1 System Level Environmental Assessment, station locations in Coon Rapids, Cambridge, Hinckley and Superior have not been finalized. That will change soon! MnDOT staff have met with representatives from these communities to discuss potential station sites, and also discussed potential sites for layover and light maintenance activities with officials from both Duluth and Sandstone.

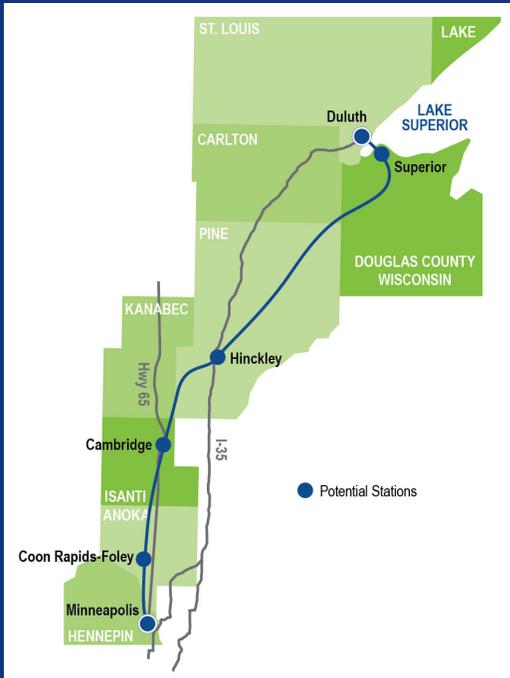
MnDOT recently hired HNTB, an engineering and planning consulting firm, to assist in site selection for each station, layover facility and the light maintenance facility. Over the next few months, MnDOT and HNTB will do a detailed review to determine the best station and facility sites, and prepare conceptual designs to ensure each site is suitable for its proposed function. Stations at intermediate communities will include:

- ▶ A boarding platform
  - ▶ Platform shelters
  - ▶ A climate controlled station building with seating, bathrooms, ticket machines and other amenities
  - ▶ Full compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act
  - ▶ Parking and vehicle access for efficient drop-off/pick-up
  - ▶ Bus, pedestrian, and bicycle access
  - ▶ Lighting and other security measures
- (See examples of station designs on page 3.)

MnDOT will own and maintain facilities constructed specifically for the NLX Project. In some cases, MnDOT may lease existing facilities owned by other public agencies. Local communities will not be obligated to contribute to the construction, operation or maintenance of stations, unless they want to pursue a joint use development opportunity.

The public will be given a chance to provide input on the site selections before final decisions are made. Open houses will be held in late September/early October 2014 to allow the public to comment on concept designs for each station and facility, as well as provide input on the process used to make final site selections.

## NLX Corridor Map



## Next Phase of Environmental Assessment Begins

This summer, MnDOT will begin the Tier 2 Project Level Environmental Assessment with the assistance of HNTB. The environmental review process will identify potential impacts and proposed improvements as preliminary engineering of track, roadways and facilities is completed. The environmental review process is expected to continue through early 2016.

## Ridership Analyses Continues

Steer Davies Gleave, the financial planning consultant hired by MnDOT, is continuing to work on ridership forecasts, revenue projections and estimates of public benefits and will be conferring with MnDOT staff to finish these tasks. All of the analysis being prepared by SDG, including how the stated preference surveys are being incorporated into the ridership 'model', is being reviewed by an independent Peer Review Panel to ensure consistency with generally accepted industry practice. Results of SDG's work are expected to be available in September 2014.

## Review of Grade Crossing Improvements

MnDOT, with the assistance of Quandel Consultants, is reviewing each grade crossing along the proposed NLX route and preparing recommendations for improvements. Special emphasis will be focused on grade crossing warning devices, such as gates and flashers, to ensure that they are appropriate for the operation of a high speed train. MnDOT is advertising for an engineering consultant to conduct preliminary engineering for grade crossings and the associated intersecting roadways, particularly where a second track is added.

## NLX Project

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4 Identify Locations for Stations and Other Facilities					█							
5 Define Operating Plan					█							
6 Preliminary Engineering of Public Roadways and Bridges						█						
7 Preliminary Engineering of Track and RR Bridges by BNSF						█						
8 Tier 2 Project Level Environmental Review						█ Through early 2016 →						

## Hinckley Loop Study on Hold

The Hinckley Loop Study is on hold awaiting the completion of the ridership forecasts being prepared for the overall NLX Project. Separate ridership forecasts for the Hinckley Loop Study are expected to be available by October 2014.



*Example of station building waiting area*

## NLX at Summer Events

Want more information about the NLX Project? Keep an eye out for NLX information at summer events along the corridor; including, the following:

- ▶ Isanti County Fair: July 23-July 27
- ▶ Pine County Fair: July 30-Aug. 3



*Example of station platform design*



*Example of station building seating area*



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## About NLX

The Northern Lights Express is a proposed high speed intercity passenger rail project to provide rail service between Minneapolis and Duluth. The NLX Project would operate on approximately 155 miles of existing BNSF rail corridor.

The NLX Project is led by the Minnesota Department of Transportation and the Federal Railroad Administration in cooperation with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation and the Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance.

## Ridership Survey Completed

As planning for the Northern Lights Express moves forward, it is necessary for the Minnesota Department of Transportation to determine how many people are expected to ride the train. As part of this effort, this past March, MnDOT conducted an extensive public survey to understand how and why travelers would choose to ride the proposed Northern Lights Express passenger train between Minneapolis and Duluth instead of driving, taking a bus or flying.

The survey was offered in a variety of ways. Randomly selected households along the Twin Cities/Duluth corridor completed the on-line based survey. In-person surveys were also conducted at several locations, such as the Mall of America in the Twin Cities and the Miller Hill Mall in Duluth. A link to the online-based survey on the project website was distributed by e-mail to the project email list and brought in additional survey responses.

Thank you to all who participated in the survey. The results of this survey will be used to ensure that the ridership forecasts for the NLX Project are based on the anticipated travel choices of people who actually live in or who would visit the NLX corridor. Preliminary survey results are expected by late summer.

## Next Phase of Environmental Assessment to Begin this Summer

The next phase of environmental review and documentation for the Northern Lights Express Project is expected to begin this summer. The environmental review for the project is divided into two stages:

**Tier 1 – System Level Environmental Assessment** was completed in 2013 and focused on impacts that affect the corridor as a whole. A Finding of No Significant Impact was issued by the Federal Railroad Administration on August 21, 2013, for the Tier 1 System Level EA.

**Tier 2 – Project Level Environmental Assessment** will begin this summer and focus on site specific impacts and mitigation. This work includes the environmental review for proposed stations, layover and maintenance facilities, and any refinements of engineering or more detailed environmental review than was completed in the Tier 1 EA. Initial locations for proposed stations and other facilities were identified in the Tier 1 EA, and MnDOT staff will meet with communities along the corridor this spring to discuss and confirm those sites, or identify potential concerns. MnDOT is planning to hire an environmental consultant to assist with the Tier 2 EA work, including further analysis and concept plans for proposed stations and other facilities. The environmental consultant is anticipated to be selected later this spring and begin work in mid-summer.

# Project Engineering Moves Forward this Summer

Preliminary engineering is expected to begin this summer for any roadway or bridge that would be affected by track construction for the Northern Lights Express Project. The areas that will be focused on are those locations where the construction of a second mainline track or extension of a siding involves an at-grade rail crossing. The BNSF Railway will perform any necessary preliminary engineering within the limits of their right-of-way.

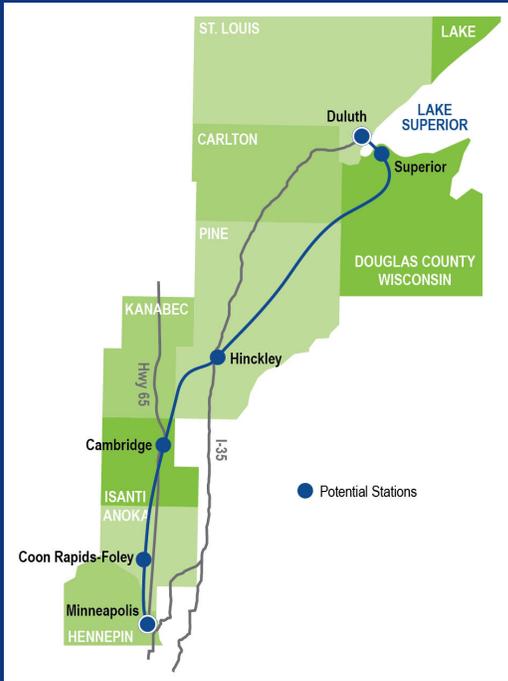
To assist with the preliminary engineering, the Minnesota Department of Transportation has begun the process of hiring an engineering consultant, who is anticipated to begin work this summer.

## NLX Project Staffing Changes

Francis Loetterle, PhD, AICP recently joined the Passenger Rail Office at the Minnesota Department of Transportation and is the new project manager for the Northern Lights Express Project. Frank has an extensive background in passenger rail transportation and comes to MnDOT from Quandel Consultants. Julie Carr, the previous NLX project manager, has moved to a planning position in MnDOT's Aeronautics Division. Peter Dahlberg, from the MnDOT Freight Rail Office, has joined the Passenger Rail Office to assist with the NLX Hinckley Loop Study and other projects. Peter replaces Steve Adamsky who has taken a position at MnDOT Metro District.

For more information on project staff updates please visit the NLX website: [mndot.gov/nlx](http://mndot.gov/nlx).

## NLX Corridor Map



## NLX Project

Schedule Timeline	2013				2014				2015			
	Qtr 1	Qtr 2	Qtr 3	Qtr 4	Qtr 1	Qtr 2	Qtr 3	Qtr 4	Qtr 1	Qtr 2	Qtr 3	Qtr 4
1 Complete Tier 1 Service Level Environmental Assessment	█											
2 Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI)			█									
3 Ridership Forecasts, Revenue Projections, Benefit Assessment			█									
4 Identify Locations for Stations and Other Facilities						█						
5 Define Operating Plan						█						
6 Preliminary Engineering of Public Roadways and Bridges						█						
7 Preliminary Engineering of Track and RR Bridges by BNSF						█						
8 Tier 2 Project Level Environmental Review						█						

# Open House Held for Hinckley Loop Study

An open house was hosted by the Minnesota Department of Transportation in Hinckley on January 28, 2014, to discuss the Hinckley Loop Project, where approximately 40 people attended the meeting. Project staff gave a brief overview of the project and the route alternatives being considered by the study. The screening and evaluation process for the alternatives was also reviewed. Initially, there were seven alternatives, of which three have been eliminated and four will continue to be studied (including the no-build alternative). Participants had an opportunity to comment on the overall project, the individual route alternatives and screening process and discuss concerns with staff.

For the next steps:

- Project staff will evaluate the remaining alternatives based on cost and environmental factors.
- Ridership impacts of the alternatives for the greater Northern Lights Express Project will also be incorporated into this analysis as this information becomes available.

## NLX Hinckley Loop Feasibility Study

Schedule Timeline	2013			2014			
	Qtr 2	Qtr 3	Qtr 4	Qtr 1	Qtr 2	Qtr 3	Qtr 4
<b>Phase 1 - Initial Analysis</b>	[Timeline bar spanning Qtr 2 2013 to Qtr 4 2013]						
Develop Potential Alternatives	[Green bar]						
Conduct Screening		[Green bar]					
Stakeholder Workshop #1			[Purple diamond]				
Public Information Meeting #1				[Purple diamond]			
<b>Phase 2 - Refine Alternatives</b>	[Timeline bar spanning Qtr 3 2013 to Qtr 2 2014]						
Develop Conceptual Layouts			[Green bar]	[Green bar]			
Develop Cost Estimates/Ridership				[Green bar]	[Green bar]		
Stakeholder Workshop #2						[Purple diamond]	
Public Information Meeting #2						[Purple diamond]	
<b>Phase 3 - Scoping</b>	[Timeline bar spanning Qtr 3 2014 to Qtr 4 2014]						
Develop Scoping Document						[Green bar]	
Scoping Meeting							[Purple diamond]
<b>Phase 4 - Final Documentation</b>	[Timeline bar spanning Qtr 4 2014 to Qtr 4 2014]						
Final Scoping Decision							[Green bar]
Final Project Report							[Green bar]



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The NLX Project is led by the Minnesota Department of Transportation and the Federal Railroad Administration in cooperation with the Wisconsin Department of Transportation and the Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance.

## Northern Lights Express Project: A Year in Review

2013 was an exciting year for the Northern Lights Express Project with many activities that advance the project forward.

- With the completion of the Tier 1 Environmental Assessment and the Federal Railroad Administration's issuance of a Finding of No Significant Impact in August, the project was able to proceed to preliminary engineering and the Tier 2 project level environmental review.
- After six years of project leadership by the Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance, the project lead was transitioned, as planned, to the Minnesota Department of Transportation. MnDOT works in collaboration with the Federal Railroad Administration, the Wisconsin Department of Transportation and the Alliance.
- Quandel Consultants, a firm with extensive high speed passenger rail experience, was hired to assist MnDOT with project management oversight, and coordination of preliminary engineering activities, Tier 2 environmental review and financial planning.
- The Hinckley Loop Study was initiated to assess the feasibility of building a direct rail "loop" connection to the Grand Casino Hinckley.

With these great accomplishments in 2013, the NLX Project is poised to continue its progress into 2014.

## Financial Planning and Ridership Study Underway

The Minnesota Department of Transportation has contracted with Steer Davies Gleave to prepare ridership and revenue forecasts, a benefit-cost analysis and a complete financial plan for the Northern Lights Express Project. SDG is a consultant firm with broad experience in preparing ridership forecasts for intercity passenger rail service, both in the US and internationally.

SDG is already collecting data on existing travel patterns between the Twin Cities and Duluth. In order to estimate how many people in the future would likely ride NLX instead of driving, flying or taking the bus, SDG will be conducting a survey of Minnesota residents. The survey will ask respondents to compare and select from several travel scenarios that vary by speed of the train, the train fare, the cost of driving or flying and other characteristics of a person's trip. This survey will be administered both online and in-person at selected locations. The information obtained from the survey will be used to develop the ridership forecast methodology, ensuring that the ridership forecasts for the NLX Project reflect the opinions of individuals that actually travel within Minnesota. Initial ridership forecast results are anticipated to be available in spring 2014.

The financial plan will be finalized after the preliminary engineering and environmental documents are completed in late 2015.

## Preliminary Engineering to Begin in 2014

The Minnesota Department of Transportation is preparing to hire two consultant firms to begin preliminary engineering work in 2014 for the Northern Lights Express Project. The consultants will prepare:

- Preliminary engineering plans and environmental documentation for stations, layover facilities and the light maintenance facility.
- Preliminary engineering plans for public and private roadways and bridges.

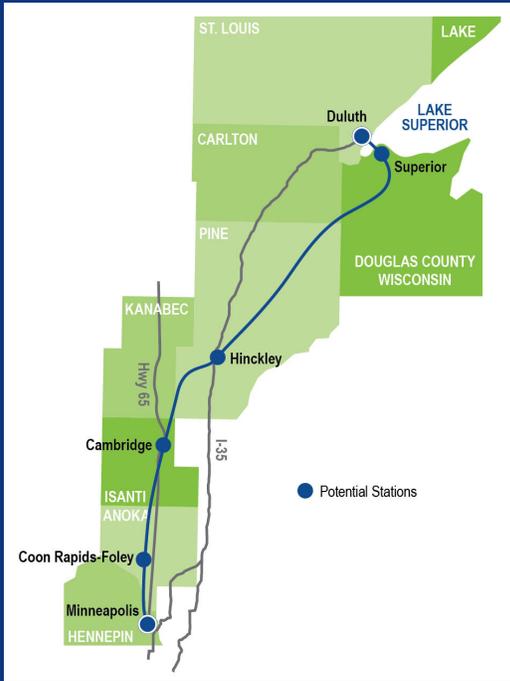
Preliminary design of track, structures and systems along the BNSF right of way will be completed by the BNSF Railway.

The station and facility consultant will assist MnDOT and the local communities in selecting sites for stations, layover facilities and the light maintenance facility. This consultant will also be responsible for the necessary environmental documentation for the entire project, primarily at locations where more detailed review is required. At this stage of the NLX Project, only preliminary design of stations and other facilities will be completed; including the determination of location, size, functional requirements and environmental impacts. More detailed architectural design will occur when the project is fully funded for construction and operation.

The public and private roadway consultant will prepare the preliminary design for roadways that require modification. The preliminary engineering plans will include the redesign of roadways and the specification of warning devices at grade crossings. Grade crossing warning devices include such things as flashing lights, gates and signs.

Solicitation for these contracts will be advertised in the next several weeks.

## NLX Corridor Map



## NLX Project

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7 Preliminary Engineering of Track and RR Bridges by BNSF						█						
8 Tier 2 Project Level Environmental Review						█						

## Hinckley Loop Study Progresses

The Minnesota Department of Transportation, in cooperation with the Northern Lights Express Alliance and the Federal Railroad Administration, is examining the feasibility of an alternative station location on the NLX alignment. The Hinckley Loop Study analyzes alternative alignments that would route the train from the existing track through downtown Hinckley to the Grand Casino, two miles to the east.

In addition to route alignments, the study examines whether a direct link to the casino would result in sufficient ridership and revenue to justify the costs of constructing the loop.

Six alternative routes have been developed, each with a station location on the east side of the casino. The six alternative route options were presented to a group of area officials at a stakeholder engagement meeting in November 2013, where comments on the alternatives were collected. Consultant staff are narrowing down the alternatives and preparing a report for MnDOT on which alternatives are recommended to advance for further study. View the six alternative routes at: [www.mndot.gov/nlx](http://www.mndot.gov/nlx).

The final study is expected to be completed in fall 2014.

## NLX Hinckley Loop Feasibility Study

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