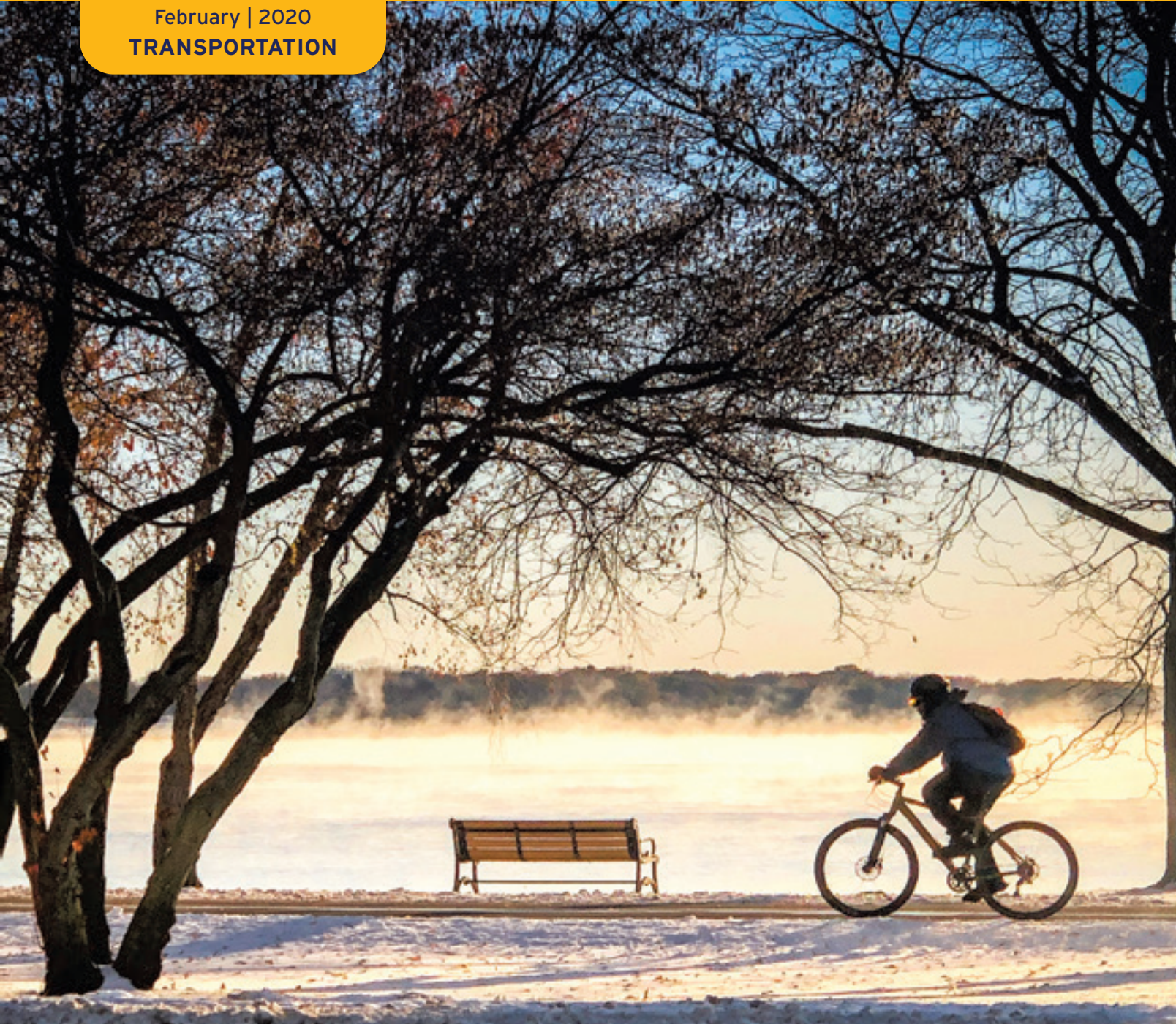


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MetroForward>> A Bold Step for Dane County Transportation

Tom Lynch, Director of Transportation, City of Madison

Madison and Dane County's population and traffic congestion have grown significantly over the past few years. In the past decade, the number of daily commuters driving to Madison from outlying municipalities and neighboring counties has increased, with nearly 30 percent of the populations of Green, Iowa, and Columbia counties commuting into Dane County each day. As of 2014, more than 95,000 people were commuting into Madison from outside of the city. As a result, congestion has become a daily experience. Along with the growing frustration over time spent in traffic, there are other serious implications on a region's economic growth and stability, quality of life, and environment.

This congestion is anticipated to continue to grow. Over the last five years, 14,000 dwelling units have been approved in Madison, and over the last three years, about 3.3 million square feet of office, commercial, and institutional space has been approved within city limits. Just as Madison's population has grown, so too has those of neighboring communities. By 2050, Dane County is projected to garner another 100,000 residents and 85,000 jobs, 45,000 of which are anticipated to reside in the Madison area. This increase will add 800,000 trips to Madison's already congested streets each day – with modeling indicating that congestion will double by 2050. Main arterial city streets like East Washington Avenue, University Avenue, and Park Street, simply have no room to add lanes. Beyond more congestion, the number of private and public parking garages would need to double to accommodate just the parking demand, with a price tag exceeding \$125 million. And yet these jobs are important to the region, the state, and the families who rely on them.

Investing in Metro Transit Makes Sense, Now More Than Ever.

Currently, Metro Transit serves six municipalities and carries 57,000 people each workday. Ten percent of the metro region workforce uses transit to get to work. Another 10 percent of the region's residents do not have access to a car – Metro Transit helps these people get to the grocery store, doctor appointments, school, and work.



Madison regularly experiences stop-and-go congestion on its key arterials.

A full bus takes less than five percent of the roadway needed to carry the same number of people by car. With traffic congestion as one of our region's significant challenges, transit is the most cost-effective and least impactful way to meet the region's growing transportation needs.

In August 2019, Mayor Rhodes-Conway, supported by members of the common council, launched MetroForward>>, a multi-faceted transit initiative designed to get Dane County residents to jobs, education, and services. It is the most aggressive transportation initiative the city has pursued in three decades. MetroForward>> includes addressing Metro's over-capacity and outdated storage facilities, implementing Bus Rapid Transit, and restructuring Metro routes to better serve the region's residents and employers.

Madison is in the process of renovating Metro's 100-year-old bus storage facility. In the 1980s, the building was redesigned to hold 160 buses, though now houses 218. The interior air quality, electrical, and old equipment pose health and safety hazards.

These deficiencies are being addressed through a four-phase project planned for completion in 2022. Already the bus wash has been relocated to an external addition, soon to be decreasing water particulates and exhaust within the building. In December, Mayor Rhodes-Conway turned on the city’s new 120 kilowatt solar array on the roof of Metro’s bus storage facility. This is just one of many ways MetroForward>> is helping to meet the city’s sustainability goal of using 100 percent renewable energy and becoming carbon neutral by the year 2030.

The Federal Transit Administration recently awarded Madison \$7 million for the purchase of a satellite facility which will allow Metro the opportunity to expand. One site being considered, a former Oscar Mayer plant, would give Metro the capability to eventually store 70 additional buses. In the near term, the satellite facility would house up to 20 new electric buses that will form the foundation of Bus Rapid Transit, a high-frequency, limited-stop service, designed to shorten travel times and increase access.

Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) is often compared to light rail, in that it receives dedicated lanes, priority at signalized intersections, and high-quality stations. Despite the similarities, BRT costs a fraction of what light rail does, allowing Madison to pursue a 15-mile Phase 1 implementation that spans from West Towne Mall to East Towne Mall, touching major employers and destinations along the way. Compared to traditional bus service, BRT has incredible potential for faster service and increased ridership. For example, Indianapolis just opened their BRT, IndyGo Red Line, in September 2019. The first month showed system-wide ridership increases of about 30 percent. Richmond Virginia’s BRT system, the Pulse, opened in June of 2018, and saw increased ridership of 17 percent.

Metro’s BRT system is planned to have electric buses, faster service with more than 50 percent dedicated bus lanes, and greater frequency. Instead of waiting 30 minutes to an hour for a bus, the frequency could be as high as every 10 minutes during peak hours. About 145,000 jobs, 110,000 residents, two higher education institutions, and three hospitals will be within a 10-minute walk of the East-West BRT line. Phase 2 of the BRT system plans to serve Madison’s north and south sides, Dane County Regional Airport, and portions of Fitchburg.

Madison will pursue Small Starts grant funding from the U.S. Federal Transit Administration, which can fund up to 80 percent of the capital cost. The goal is for the East-West line of BRT to be operational by 2024, with the Phase 2 North-South line following soon after.

Finally, to support and prepare for BRT, Metro Transit is enlisting a consultant to study route structure. While Metro Transit reaches most of the metro region, some areas are not well-served and require long travel times and transfers. The study process will help Metro balance the competing goals of frequency and coverage.


The benefits of implementing MetroForward>> are anticipated to be significant. Beyond reduction of traffic congestion and carbon emissions, BRT will support our growing regional economy. An American Public Transit Association study found that every dollar invested in public transportation generated four dollars in economic returns. Recently, it was found that Cleveland’s BRT, the Healthline Euclid corridor, generated \$9.5 billion in economic development – the highest return on a transit investment in the nation. This is just one of many successful stories that we have seen of municipalities across the nation implementing BRT. It is reasonable to expect these investments will enable continued economic growth, helping Wisconsin’s metro areas stay competitive with other metro regions throughout the nation.

To support our regional growth, recruit and retain strong business and talent, protect our environment, and ensure a great quality of life for our residents, Madison is investing in success – MetroForward>> sustainable, accessible, and reliable transportation.

If you would like to learn more about the MetroForward>> initiative, visit cityofmadison.com/metroforward

About the Author:

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