CASE-IN-POINT | 2025

BEYOND THE BUSWAY

Lessons from Winnipeg's Southwest Transitway

CHRIS SONES (UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA)
In collaboration with
BJORN RADSTROM (WINNIPEG TRANSIT)

Figure 1: Southwest Transitway Harkness Station

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This report examines the development of the Southwest Transitway, Winnipeg's first investment in a rapid transit system. The transitway provides the infrastructure for the Blue Line, linking the University of Manitoba to downtown via a dedicated transit right-of-way. The first section opened in 2012, running between Main Street at Stradbrook Avenue to Pembina Highway at Jubilee Avenue. The second section opened in 2020, completing the line to the University of Manitoba via a right-of-way in a Manitoba Hydro corridor.

As Winnipeg Transit plans for the enhancement and extension of the Blue Line, understanding and applying the lessons learned from the development of the first sections is of key importance. Planning for the future of the project involves a complex set of tasks, including public engagement and communications, route planning and infrastructure, financing, and navigating the political climate. Each task impacts the others, so all must be considered as each step of the plan is executed.

2.0 BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

The need for some type of rapid transit in Winnipeg has been discussed since the 1950s when a subway system was proposed. In the 1960s and 70s, the focus switched to a monorail system. In 1971, the City of Winnipeg Act merged Winnipeg with many of the surrounding municipalities and Winnipeg Transit was formed. The monorail continued to be evaluated as the city's preferred rapid transit system

> **"Greater Winnipeg Transit Commission wants to start within five years construction of a cross-town subway system..."**
>
> **The Winnipeg Tribune**
>
> **April 11, 1959**

until the project was abandoned in 1978. As the monorail concept was discarded, the idea of a "bus-only roadway" began to gain traction as a rapid transit option (The Winnipeg Tribune, 1978).

2.1 RAPID TRANSIT SYSTEMS

As rapid transit was discussed in the following years and decades, the Southwest Transit Corridor was initially envisioned with plans to run it down Pembina Highway. Various types of systems were considered over the coming decades as the topic continued to be debated. An article written in 1990 by the Director of Winnipeg Transit discussed three main options (Borland, 1990):

- **Busway**
- **Light Rail Transit (LRT)**
- **Fixed Guideway System**

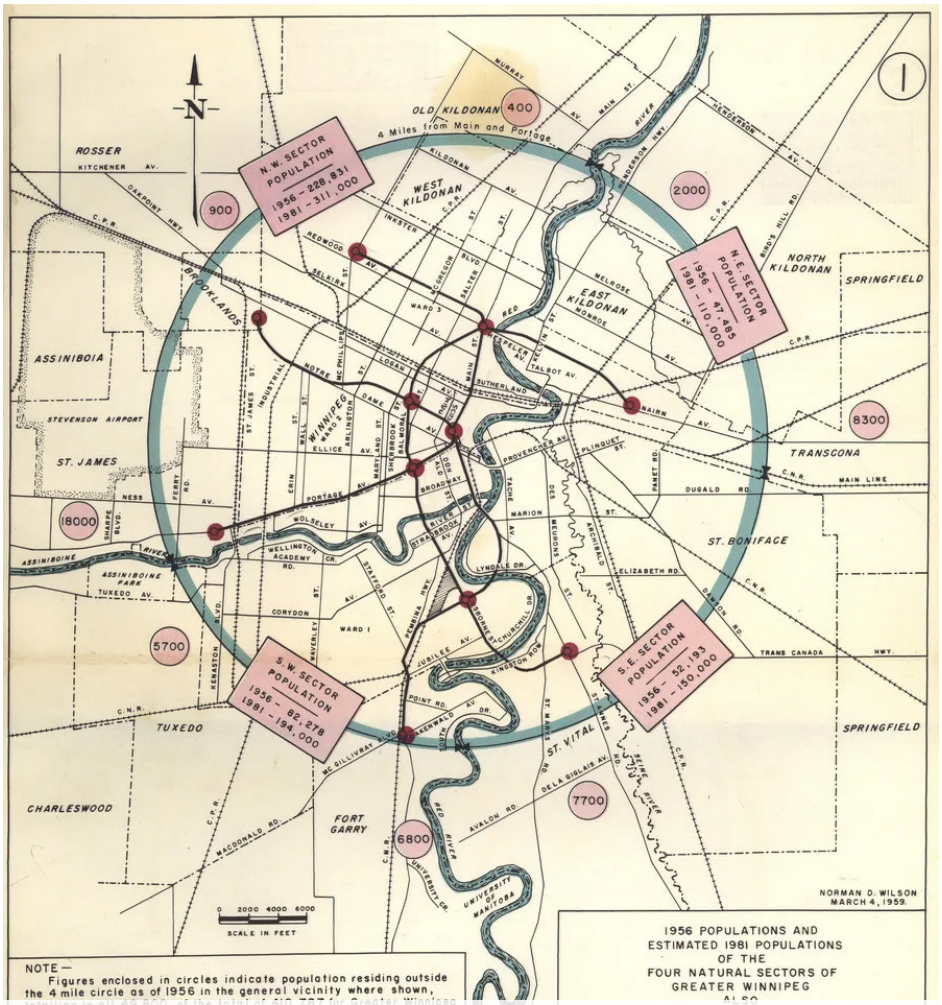

Figure 2: Proposed Winnipeg Subway System, 1959

At this time, Ottawa was the only Canadian city with a dedicated busway as a part of its transit network, which had opened in 1983. Other Canadian prairie cities had already implemented LRT systems. Edmonton's LRT opened in 1978, and Calgary's CTrain opened in 1981. Vancouver had recently opened their SkyTrain in December 1985, in the leadup to their hosting of Expo 86. This is the only Canadian example of a fixed guideway system with the unique characteristic of driverless trains.

Expected population growth in the south of Winnipeg and traffic congestion on Pembina Highway were cited as the main reasons for locating the first section of rapid transit between downtown and the University of Manitoba (Borland, 1990, p. 5).

2.2 ALIGNMENT

As the busway was initially envisioned, the route was expected to be constructed in the CNR rail right-of-way along Pembina Highway between Jubilee Avenue and the university, as this was close to existing transit routes and population density. Once the final evaluation of the alignment was conducted, three options were considered (Krahn, 2013):

Options 1a/1b - Parker/Manitoba Hydro Lands

Option 2 - CN Letellier Subdivision

Option 3 - Pembina Highway Centre Median

During the initial evaluation, it was decided that Option 3 was not feasible due to significant road reconstruction and commercial property dislocation, safety concerns for the 48 median openings along Pembina Highway, and the inability of the bridge crossing at Abinojii Mikanah to accommodate the dedicated space.

The final recommendation for the Parker/Manitoba Hydro Lands alignment was based on an evaluation of the following criteria (Krahn, 2013, pp. 57-62):

ENGINEERING

Operational: Overall distance, length of structures, number of at-grade intersections, drainage, multi-modal accommodation, running speed, and existing and future ridership.

Implementation: Project phasing, disruption to traffic and landowners during construction, and complexity of land assembly.

COMMUNITY AND ENVIRONMENT

Environmental: Ecologically significant natural lands, environmentally impacted lands, and green space.

Community: Disruption to community, community amenity and opportunity, and connectivity to nearby communities.

ECONOMIC

Property: Commercial and industrial displacement and residential displacement.

TOD and TIF Metrics: Area for transit-oriented development (TOD), measure of potential mixed-use development, present value estimate of potential tax revenue from TOD, estimate of existing tax revenues from lands subject to TOD, and present value estimate of incremental tax revenue from TOD for tax-increment financing (TIF).

Costs: Preliminary construction costs (not including land) and estimated overall costs (including land and escalation).

2.3 POLITICAL INACTION

The amount of time taken between the first discussion of rapid transit in Winnipeg in the 1950s and the opening of the first section of the Southwest Transitway in 2012 highlights the inability of Winnipeg's historical decision-makers to come together and move forward with a plan. Much ink was spilled creating reports and discussing the best options for the city, but in the end, the last half of the 20th Century passed without rapid transit being implemented.

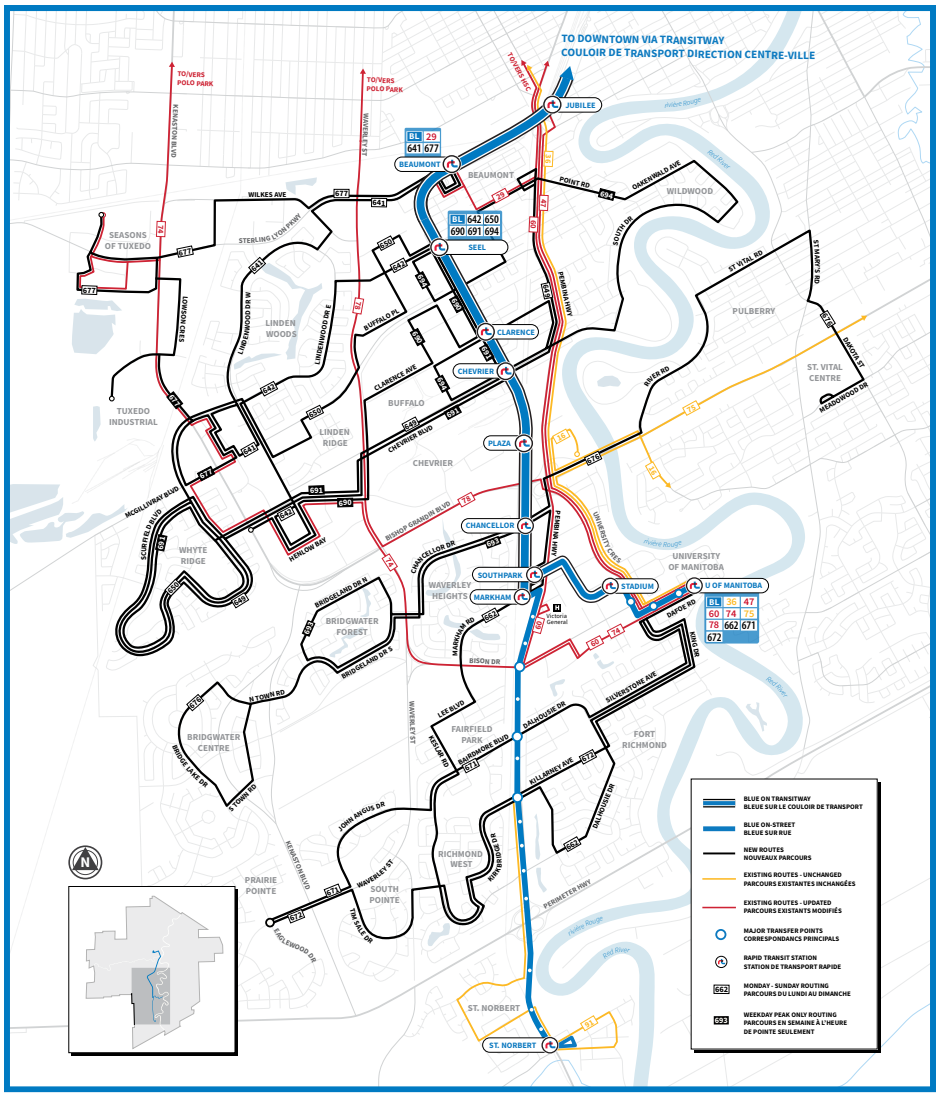

Figure 3: Blue Line Route Overview

It remains to be seen what the future holds for rapid transit expansion in the city. The top rapid transit investment priorities outlined in the Winnipeg Transit Master Plan include (City of Winnipeg, 2021, p. 62):

- Main Street from Higgins Avenue to St Mary's Road and Taché Avenue
- Portage Avenue from the University of Winnipeg to Westbrook Street

Due to the location of these routes, the right-of-way must be integrated into the existing downtown road network. This means significant cost and disruption in downtown to create this important nexus of the various planned lines, and it remains to be seen whether Winnipeg's current and future decision-makers are willing to make this network expansion happen.

3.0 FACTS OF THE CASE

As the Southwest Transitway was designed and built, several processes were happening throughout. This includes the design of the physical infrastructure, public engagement sessions, and the development of the financing model. Given the long timespan of this type of project, these processes were conducted concurrently, and the organization of smaller tasks within these processes impacted the outcomes substantially.

3.1 SYSTEM TYPE

The system developed for the Southwest Transitway has sometimes been referred to as a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system, but it does not technically meet this definition. The Institute for Transportation & Development Policy notes five features that define BRT (Institute for Transportation & Development Policy, n.d.):

1. **Dedicated Right-of-Way:** Bus-only lanes make for faster travel and ensure that buses are never delayed due to mixed traffic congestion.
2. **Busway Alignment:** Centre of roadway or bus-only corridor keeps buses away from the busy curbside where cars are parking, standing, and turning.
3. **Off-board Fare Collection:** Fare payment at the station, instead of on the bus, eliminates the delay caused by passengers waiting to pay on board.
4. **Intersection Treatments:** Prohibiting turns for traffic across the bus lane reduces delays caused to buses by turning traffic. Prohibiting such turns is the most important measure

Figure 4: Centre of road busway alignment

for moving buses through intersections – more important even than signal priority.

5. **Platform-level Boarding:** The station should be at level with the bus for quick and easy boarding. This also makes it fully accessible for wheelchairs, disabled passengers, strollers and carts with minimal delays.

The Southwest Transitway meets most BRT criteria, including the costly and complex dedicated right-of-way. One key aspect missing is off-board fare collection. This can be integrated into the transitway but requires enhancements to the fare collection system. Winnipeg Transit plans to implement this type of system before the construction of the West Rapid Transit Corridor (City of Winnipeg, 2021, p. 79).

3.2 SYSTEM DESIGN PROCESS

The Southwest Transitway alignment and infrastructure were designed first, and the route planning was designed afterward. Since the project was structured as a Public-Private Partnership (P3), this required a detailed outline of the construction timeline and costs for the proponent to allow them to assess their overall project risk. This structure made later-stage changes to infrastructure design more costly and difficult.

3.3 PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The public engagement involved two distinct topics: the first stage of engagement covered the alignment and design of the transitway, and the second stage covered the design of the transit routes to service it.

The first stage was conducted in three rounds between October 2013 and June 2015 and involved a wide range of stakeholders (Landmark Planning and Design, 2015). The stakeholder list included governments, schools, utilities, adjacent landowners/ leaseholders, and community groups. This stage of engagement aimed to educate these groups on the plans as they existed at that time, to understand stakeholder concerns, and to identify the next steps in the process. This engagement was conducted by Landmark Planning and Design.

The second stage was conducted in the spring of 2019 and was aimed at transit users (Winnipeg Transit, 2019). Winnipeg Transit conducted this engagement stage with a series of open houses and online surveys. The open houses were conducted in the areas with proposed routes that would connect to the future Southwest Transitway.

4.0 LESSONS LEARNED

The final alignment of the Southwest Transitway makes it unique in the planned rapid transit network because of the availability of the rights-of-way along rail lines and the Manitoba Hydro corridor. The next planned rapid transit expansions do not have such long stretches of land available, and integrating new lines into existing roadways will present a challenge that was largely avoided in this first section of rapid transit.

The lessons that were learned from the development and

Figure 5: Public engagement sessions before the opening of the Southwest Transitway

construction of the transitway fall into the categories of public engagement and communications, coordination of route planning and infrastructure design, and how the political climate impacts rapid transit development.

4.1 PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATIONS

The transit planners at Winnipeg Transit conducted the public engagement for the route planning of the Southwest Transitway and learned several lessons in the process. Shortly after the opening of the second stage of the transitway, the COVID-19 pandemic also disrupted the status quo of public consultation, which influenced engagement strategies for future rapid transit projects.

Small-scale engagement directly in the impacted communities is effective. This approach will be used for future engagement, and the more sessions conducted, the better the results. However, given limited resources, there must be a clear strategic purpose for each engagement session. New technology that was widely adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic will help reach people more widely, but caution must be exercised to avoid missing groups that do not use this technology (e.g., video conferencing software).

Special attention must be paid to the type of engagement conducted with groups like Indigenous people or newcomers. During the engagement for the Southwest Transitway, small-scale sessions were conducted with Indigenous communities that involved important cultural elements, such as serving a meal and creating a less formal atmosphere for providing feedback. Newcomers are also a unique group, as some may come from societies where it is unacceptable to criticize government officials. It is important to help these people understand that engagement sessions are a safe space to provide honest feedback, even if it is negative.

It is important to frame the engagement in a way that gets people to describe their problems instead of proposing solutions. As more people describe their problems, this helps planners gain a clearer picture of the broad problems impacting many riders. There is no way to address every problem for every transit rider, so addressing the problems that impact the most riders allows for a strategic use of resources.

4.2 ROUTES BEFORE INFRASTRUCTURE

During the planning of the Southwest Transitway, infrastructure was planned before routes, which led to problems that required costly change orders. An example of this was the need to reconstruct certain intersections because the infrastructure plan did not account for the turning radius needed where some feeder bus routes enter the transitway. This was not due to poor planning, but simply because without fixed routes on which to base the infrastructure plans, it was impossible to predict all details. Designing routes first allows service to drive infrastructure design.

Designing routes first allows service to drive infrastructure design.

Designing a route network that is less likely to change as rapid transit infrastructure is developed also provides predictability to developers. The FX lines in the new primary network are the planned routes of rapid transit, giving developers more certainty about where they can build density now to take advantage of future infrastructure and service enhancements. Primary network service cannot be removed from a street except with approval from Winnipeg City Council, creating further stability in the transit network and certainty for developers.

Another aspect of change orders occurring due to the planning order was their higher cost under the P3 model. During the RFP process for a P3 contract, the proponent develops a very detailed construction schedule,

Figure 6: Winnipeg City Council has the final say on future rapid transit projects

which helps them develop a risk profile for the project and price accordingly. Since this schedule is a significant part of what underlies the P3 contract, change orders modify the foundation of the contract, requiring a more in-depth analysis for each one.

Designing service first also allows for a more incremental approach to building the rapid transit network. For major routes where rapid transit will be integrated into the existing right-of-way, smaller sections can be built. This minimizes disruption and allows for a step-by-step assessment of route integration with infrastructure.

4.3 THE POLITICAL CLIMATE AND RAPID TRANSIT

It is obvious when examining the last 70 years of rapid transit discussion and development in Winnipeg that the political climate dictates what does or does not get built. Cities like Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver, Calgary, and Edmonton have been more willing and prepared to invest in rapid transit, which has allowed them to take advantage of large federal public transportation investments.

Incremental development of rapid transit may be one way to overcome political inertia. Each investment would be smaller and would not necessarily require support from higher levels of government.

SOUTHWEST TRANSITWAY USE TODAY

The Blue Line servicing the Southwest Transitway was Winnipeg's busiest bus route. Below are the weekday ridership volumes from the five busiest routes in fall 2024:

1. **Blue Line – 18,089**
2. **Route 11 – 11,308**
3. **Route 47 – 11,171**
4. **Route 16 – 10,897**
5. **Route 18 – 10,767**

The Blue Line is approximately 60% busier than the second busiest route, demonstrating strong demand for rapid transit in Winnipeg.

Figure 7: Southwest Transitway Use Today

5.0

FINAL THOUGHTS

A major hurdle has been cleared with the completion of the Southwest Transitway. Winnipeggers can now experience rapid transit in their city and begin to imagine what taking the bus might look like with city-wide rapid transit.

The investments to date provide a higher level of service without over-building the system for demand that does not yet exist. The transitway supports future enhancements like off-board fare collection, platform-level boarding, or conversion to LRT once ridership warrants it.

By incorporating the lessons learned from the Southwest Transitway into the development of the upcoming downtown rapid transit investments, we will see more and more people benefitting from decades of transit planning.

Figure 8: Rendering of future downtown rapid transit at Union Station

REFERENCES

Borland, R. (1990). Winnipeg's Proposed Southwest Transit Corridor. *The Manitoba Professional Engineer*, 4–5.

City of Winnipeg. (2021). *Winnipeg Transit Master Plan*.

Institute for Transportation & Development Policy. (n.d.). *What is BRT?* Institute for Transportation & Development Policy. Retrieved March 12, 2025, from https://itdp.org/library/standards-and-guides/the-bus-rapid-transit-standard/what-is-brt/

Krahn, D. (2013). *City of Winnipeg Southwest Rapid Transit Corridor Stage 2 Alignment Study Final Report*. https://info.winnipegtransit.com/assets/1169/Final_Report_-_SWRTC_Stage_2_Alignment_Options-web.pdf

Landmark Planning and Design. (2015). *SOUTHWEST TRANSITWAY (STAGE 2) Public and Stakeholder Engagement Report*. https://info.winnipegtransit.com/assets/2144/2015-08-24_SWT_Public_Consultation_Report_BODY_-_FINAL.PDF

The Winnipeg Tribune. (1978, November 23). Rapid transit corridor idea resurrected. *The Winnipeg Tribune*, 10. https://digitalcollections.lib.umanitoba.ca/islandora/object/uofm%3A2789706

Winnipeg Transit. (2019). *Southwest Transitway Route Planning Project - Public Engagement Summary Report*. https://info.winnipegtransit.com/assets/2469/APPENDIX_D_-_Public_Engagement_Summary_Report.pdf

FIGURES

1. *Southwest Transitway Harkness Station*. [Digital Image] (n.d.). Dillon Consulting. https://www.dillon.ca/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/winnipeg_transit_harkness-station-southwest-transitway-winnipeg.jpg

2. Adapted from *Future Development of Public Transit in Greater Winnipeg*. Wilson, N. (1959). https://i0.wp.com/transitmap.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/tumblr_mq3px79GtJ1r54c4oo1_1280.jpg?w=898&ssl=1

3. Adapted from *Transit in Southwest Winnipeg*. Winnipeg Transit. (n.d.). https://info.winnipegtransit.com/en/service/blue-rapid-transit

4. *Centre of Road Busway Alignment.* [Digital Image] (n.d.) https://www.uitp.org/publications/transforming-cities-with-bus-rapid-transit-brt-systems/

5. Adapted from *Southwest Transitway Route Planning - Public Engagement Summary.* (2019). Winnipeg Transit. https://info.winnipegtransit.com/assets/2469/APPENDIX_D_-_Public_Engagement_Summary_Report.pdf

6. *Winnipeg City Hall*. [Digital Image] (n.d.). Glowacki, W. Winnipeg Free Press. https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2024/03/2179423_web1_e-city-hall-glowacki-Aug31.jpg?w=1920

7. Adapted from *Winnipeg Transit Top 5 Routes by Weekday Ridership, Fall 2024.* (2024). Bjorn Radstrom, Winnipeg Transit.

8. Adapted from *Winnipeg Transit Master Plan*. Winnipeg Transit. (2021). p. 57