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Serving the communities of Inver Grove Heights, South St. Paul, Mendota Heights, West St. Paul, Mendota, Lilydale and Sunfish Lake —

Inside

'Kids, Cones and Cows'



Page 3

Local

Chris Hiti named new Heritage Middle School principal

Page 3

Residents ponder a Robert St. light rail

Heather Edwards
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What is the future of light rail in Northern Dakota County?

This was the question that area residents from West St. Paul and surrounding communities pondered last Thursday during a community forum on transit light rail. The forum was sponsored by the Minnesota North Star chapter of the Sierra Club.

Approximately 40 community members attended the meeting at the Dodge Nature Center. The forum kicked off a grassroots campaign that will advocate for both light rail and better transit options in the area. "We are planning to invite people back for a campaign planning session," Conservation Organizer Margaret Levin explained.

Mat Hollinshead, transportation chair of the Sierra Club North Star

Chapter, DFL State Rep. Rick Hansen of South St. Paul and transportation organizer at the North Star Chapter, discussed the potential installation of a light-rail line down Robert Street to ease traffic congestion and decrease pollution. The route would end at Inver Hills Community College.

"People are using the Hiawatha light-rail line and wondering, 'Why didn't we do this sooner?'" I think

it's something that only helps communities and the environment," said Celeste Riley, a Sierra Club member from Mendota Heights and one of the organizers of the forum.

According to the Minnesota chapter's Web site (www.northstar.sierraclub.org), the Twin Cities will grow by nearly one million new residents over the next 30

see **Light rail** on Page 5



South-West Review

Light rail...

continued from Page 1

years, furthering the need for alternative transportation. On a smaller scale, the chapter is currently focusing on the Robert Street corridor.

Minnesota chapter volunteer Diane Englin-Elliott predicted that West St. Paul is going to be a "huge" shopping area, which raises both environmental issues as well as safety concerns for pedestrians, particularly children.

The light rail would promote a boost in business as well.

"If it's convenient to come from other areas, instead of bringing a car and trying to find a place to park, it will encourage people who might not have driven to that part of town," Englin-Elliott said.

Englin-Elliott further noted that Robert Street is home to several grocery stores and a Wal-Mart, among many other stores. In addition, a Super-Target and Lowe's will be

added to the area soon. "And that's just in the West St. Paul area," said Englin-Elliott, noting there are many attributes in South St. Paul, Inver Grove Heights, Mendota and Mendota Heights.

With a light rail in this Robert Street corridor, she said, "We can maintain the area as it is now, rather than making it like Highway 52. It will keep our area from becoming like that. It will be more commuter and pedestrian friendly.

"It will be keeping (the area) the same, while letting it grow."

The opening of the Hiawatha light-rail line in 2004 was the first step in implementing the Metropolitan Council's master plan for transit, which calls for a network of dedicated transit corridors including commuter rail, busways, light rail and a doubling of the regional bus system.

However, "Dakota County

is not really in the plan," Levin said. "That's why we're so interested in this. We're looking at how to be a part of the future."

In May, Hansen announced both the Republicans and Democrats had joined together in the House of Representatives to pass a \$7.7 billion transportation package.

"The House has taken a major step toward meeting our transportation needs," Hansen noted.

In addition, Hansen proposed a bill that would provide \$2 million to examine the potential for extending light-rail or rapid-bus service down the Robert Street Corridor into Mendota Heights, Inver Grove Heights and other nearby communities.

Hansen's bill was introduced at the end of the last session, and time ran out before the bill could be discussed. According to his assistant Elizabeth Emerson, Hansen hopes to have the bill discussed during a bonding hearing next year.