

# **SOUTHWEST TRANSIT STRATEGIC PLAN**

**2022-2024**

Adopted February, 2022



**SOUTHWEST TRANSIT**

*The greatest thing in the world is not so  
much where we are, but in which  
direction we are moving –*

Oliver Wendell Holmes

## Executive Overview

The SouthWest Transit Commission has put forth this strategic plan to further achieve our vision of being a premium transit system that provides extraordinary services, facilities, and equipment.

Our vision is dictated by our commitment to providing the best service for our customers and the communities we serve. As we look toward the future, we see that maintaining our service quality, expanding our service options, improving safety, remaining financially strong, and providing leadership on transportation issues will be necessary if we intend to be successful and stay ahead of customer needs and expectations.

In completing a strategic plan, the general statement “the next 3-5 years will be the most critical and challenging the agency has ever been through” is used allot. In the case of SouthWest Transit, truer words have never been spoken.

Besides replacing the agency’s top two positions (CEO and COO); having to deal with rebuilding the system as a result of the pandemic; wrestling control and funding away from the Metropolitan Council, meeting staffing needs in tight and competitive labor market; dealing with supply chain issues on virtually everything we purchase; designing and implementing connecting service related to the SWLRT as well as determining how to operate together out of the same location (SouthWest Station); and ensuring for the safety of our customers and staff will all be top priorities.

A great organization is one that delivers superior performance and makes a distinctive impact over an extended period. Maintaining service quality, providing customer friendly and reliable services, and meeting service needs is necessary if we plan to rebuild and eventually increase ridership once again.

## Strategic Planning Process

The strategic planning process undertaken by the SouthWest Transit Commission included an examination of the following:

- An understanding of where SouthWest Transit has come from.
- An understanding of the internal and external conditions affecting the organization.
- Re-examination/confirmation of SouthWest Transit's Mission.
- Re-examination/confirmation of SouthWest Transit's Core Values.
- Identification of the agency's goals and the actions necessary to reach those goals.

By completing this plan, the intention is to have the entire organization understand the agency's mission and values, and to have a clear vision of what it will take to achieve the desired level of excellence.

We recognize that achieving the vision is not only a means of maximizing our resources, but that it is also a process of expressing our aspirations. Therefore, the strategic plan is to be a living document that embodies the organization's way of thinking and performing. As our environment, organization, and strategies continue to change, our strategic plan will evolve to manage these changes.

## 2022-2024 Strategic Plan

**MISSION:** *“SouthWest Transit is committed to providing exceptional services that not only meets the needs but exceeds all expectations of those we serve.”*

**VISION:** *“To deliver the highest quality, most innovative, safest, and customer friendly transit services in our region.”*

**BRAND:** *Trusted, High Quality, Innovative.*

**CREDO:** *“Expect the Best.”*

### CORE VALUES:

- ▶ **“Commitment to Excellence”** - Committed to providing, safe, dependable, and cost-effective services, along with high quality facilities and vehicles.
- ▶ **“Commitment to Customer Satisfaction and Service”** - Committed to providing exceptional customer service, keeping the customer in the forefront of all decisions.
- ▶ **“Commitment to Innovation, Technology, and Entrepreneurship”**- Committed to bringing new and innovative ways of providing transit services to our customers and communities.
- ▶ **“Commitment to our Employees’ Health, Morale, and Professional Development”** - Committed to investing in the talents of our dedicated employees, and ensure that their safety, well-being, and work environment remains an agency priority.
- ▶ **“Commitment to Financial Strength”** - Committed to ensuring financial viability to meet operating expenses while maintaining productive service levels allowing for growth.
- ▶ **“Commitment to Leadership”** - Committed to expanding our leadership role by providing influence on transportation.
- ▶ **“Commitment to our Communities”** - Committed to providing value to the communities we serve by operating with discipline, integrity, and acceptance of diverse viewpoints.

## Critical Issues - Opportunities/Threats

- **Metropolitan Council** - Operating and capital funding including policy control; planning priorities; vehicle ownership and replacement; and service expansion.
- **COVID-19 Impacts** - Future of Downtown Mpls Ridership; Federal Funding; Reserves; Staff/Customer Safety; Protocols; Rebuilding the System; Pivoting into New Markets, Changing fleet composition.
- **Commission** - Engage, Lead, Inspire.
- **Staff** - Attracting/Retaining/Developing Staff.
- **Supply Chain** – Navigating through delays on everything we purchase (Vehicle, Vehicle parts, fuel, raw materials, etc.).
- **Equity** - Being mindful of equity and access for all. Serving diverse markets.
- **Safety and Security** – Customers and staff need to feel safe.
- **Support** - Local Government Inclusion. Legislative support and (Funding; Policies, etc....).
- **Community** – Need to maintain and build even Stronger Community Relationships with organizations and local businesses.
- **Emerging Technologies** – Need to position the agency to take advantage of modern technology such as electric and autonomous vehicles; software advancements; other advancements that allow customers the freedom to conduct business the way they prefer.
- **SWLRT** – Build strong partnerships with the region relating to the construction, cohabitation, and service delivery. Ensure agreements with the Metropolitan Council are adhered to.
- **Long Term Survival** - Potential merge with other provider(s). Establish long range plans for the delivery of new service and service types.

## Strategic GOALS

**Goal #1: Improve the agency's ability to control and fund its operation.**

**Rational:** To be successful at meeting our Mission and Vision for the future, SWT needs to gain independence from the Metropolitan Council

*and have control over operational policy, service delivery, and budgets. The Metropolitan Council has not taken a regional approach to transit, and as the region's largest provider of transit services (Metro Transit and Metro Mobility), funding and policy decisions are at times in direct conflict to suburban services leaving our system at a disadvantage.*

**Responsibility:** *Commission (meet with key stakeholders to gain support for our positions), and Senior Staff (develop action steps and execute the plan).*

**Strategies:**

- *Seek a Legislative change that would allow SWT to better control and fund its operations. Actions that would allow the agency to control the type of services offered, fares charged, vehicles operated and vehicle ownership, Actions could also include a structural change by transferring oversight responsibilities from the Metropolitan Council. Besides eliminating the competition for funding that currently exists, this allows the suburban systems to be grouped with peer operations like Duluth, St. Cloud, Mankato, and Rochester who are already under Mn/DOT oversight.*
- *Seek an equitable share of MVST funding through the Legislature. The formula from 2002 has not kept current with the growth which has occurred in the suburbs. The Transfer of MVST funding will be necessary if oversight should transfer.*
- *SWT should seek control of the transit tax collected in our three cities (Chanhassen, Chaska, and Eden Prairie). This is especially critical if oversight should transfer.*
- *Seek change to become a direct recipient of federal funding including all 5307 funding, grants, and COVID relief. This will require action by the Governor, which we will need to enlist the support of our State and Federal Legislators if this is to happen.*
- *Urge the Met Council and TAB to distribute public transit investments equitably throughout the metro region regardless of transit type/mode (majority of investments have been funneled to BRT/LRT). The suburbs have the same transit needs as the core cities, and while investments have grown, the suburbs struggle for its share of funding to provide services that meet those needs of our expanding service areas.*

- Educate and find true legislative champions. Need to convince legislators now is the time for strong action. This is especially important should the results of the next election put those more sympathetic to suburban transit in control.
- Build stronger community relationships. This group will also need to play a significant role with local, state, and federal legislators.
- Develop annual initiatives, engage all Commission members, and meet with all area and influential Legislators as well as other key stakeholders.
- Evaluate our ability to work together with like-minded organizations (STA).
- Find a better/more efficient way to maximize relationships with our alliances.
- Continue the pursuit of non-traditional revenue streams such as the revenue generated from advertising, leasing, parking, and real estate development.

***Goal #2: Add/maintain/and build a strong staff to meet the agency's needs now and into the future.***

***Rational:*** Change is inevitable. SWT has had the fortune of maintaining a stable management team for many years. With the recent retirement of the COO and pending retirement of the CEO, maintaining stability as well as addressing many critical issues such as building back from COVID 19; gaining independence from the Metropolitan Council; managing budgets; maintaining an adequate work force during this time of worker shortages by doing whatever is needed to develop, train, and pay to keep critical staff in place will be vital in the coming years. Overall, we must continue to build upon the culture where everyone feels welcome, included, and valued.

***Responsibility:*** Commission (CEO hiring, funding and support), and Senior Staff (develop action steps and execute the plan).

***Strategies:***

- Hire new CEO that maintains and helps conduct the vision and values established over the past 35 years.
- Maintain an agency culture that makes employees feel welcomed, valued, and included.

- Improve communications, engage employees, and provide them with a voice in setting the course of action for the agency.
- Provide a positive physical working environment.
- Maintain adequate staffing levels to optimize operations and address critical needs.
- Inventory existing talent (leadership skills, behaviors, knowledge): Each staff member has and continues to be evaluated using a classification system identifying the potential for advancement. This evaluation process should continue to be conducted annually as part of the annual performance review process.
- Identify pivotal positions that would negatively impact vital functions should they become vacant. These positions included those that require specific skills, which are difficult to replace and/or have no identified replacement.
- Recruit and/or develop employees to fill pivotal roles and functions that preserve both the short- and long-term viability of the organization. Currently over 60% of SWT employees started their career with SWT in an entry level position.
- Update/revise job functions and compensation to reflect responsibilities that correspond to the marketplace. Provide for advancement possibilities when available.
- Invest in employees through training and professional development. Training programs have and should continue to be established as part of each employee's annual work plan. Identify the type of training that will help the employee not only fulfill their current position, but to become a more valuable leader for the organization.
- Develop each employee's performance plan to include strategies built around the agency's core values and leadership.
- Evaluate bringing the last operational function in-house – Drivers. This will be evaluated to ensure quality, and to attract and retain the best employees that enable us to meet SouthWest Transit's needs and standards.

***Goal #3: Ensure the safety and security of customers, staff, and assets.***

***Rational: Customer and staff safety is at the core of everything we do. Whether it relates to keeping customers and staff safe while on our***



*vehicles or in our facilities, providing a state-of-the-art driver and safety training program, or taking advanced precautions like we did during the recent pandemic, safety is key to keep customers riding and staff comfortable coming to work.*

***Responsibility:*** *Commission (develop policies and funding), and All Staff (assist with the development of policies, develop action steps and execute the plan).*

***Strategies:***

- Update and implement the Emergency Preparedness Plan and train all staff accordingly. Add procedures developed during the COVID Pandemic and the updated procedures addressing cyber security.
- Continue zero tolerance of any violation of the rider code of conduct.
- Review and improve physical security systems at all facilities and on vehicles (cameras, panic alarms, motion sensors, etc.).
- Renew safety review committee and security incident review teams.
- Develop and implement a strong cyber security plan.
- Conduct and pass annual OSHA audit.
- Conduct monthly safety meetings with all staff.
- Work with the City of Eden Prairie and Metro Transit in advance of LRT starting up operations in Eden Prairie.
- Maintain and expand plans/protocols to keep staff and customers safe as it relates to current and future pandemics.
- Continue to develop actions and work with neighboring agencies and groups to help address the issue of homeless and provide guidance/assistance to individuals in need who use our services, and/or unfortunately try and use our stations as temporary housing.

***Goal #4: Ensure financial stability through internal actions that meet the agency's objectives and long-term funding needs.***

***Rational:*** *Keeping the agency financially strong and maintaining public trust in our ability to be effective stewards of public funding will be paramount as we move into an unsettled future following the large ridership and revenue declines as the result of COVID 19.*

**Responsibility:** *Commission (funding and establishing policy), and Senior Staff (assist with policy development, develop action steps and execute the plan).*

**Strategies:**

- Deliver a balanced budget annually.
- Evaluate and adjust services to ensure they remain cost effective.
- Maintain a minimum general fund reserve balance of 25% - 35% of the annual operating budget.
- Maintain debt at or below 10% of annual budget.
- Update and maintain asset management and capital improvement plans. Maintain assets to maximize their useful life and develop a capital replacement strategy/budget for maintenance and replacement.
- Advocate for equitable share of state and federal resources. Continue to collaborate with the Metropolitan Council, Legislature, and others to seek out new funding sources, or actions to increase the level of funding for suburban transit operations.
- Approach service from an entrepreneurial point of view, undertake cost sharing partnerships where and when appropriate.
- Aggressively pursue development options for the SW Village site.
- Actively pursue outside grant opportunities.
- Monitor and Maintain agency financial policies (reserves; capital; cash flow; financial liability; investments; other).
- Explore non-traditional revenue sources such as the development of real estate holdings and developing cost sharing partnerships centered around service delivery keeping mindful of federal charter regulations.
- Program/reinvest reserves generated from real estate transactions to meet service or service deliver needs, or in actions that generate future revenue streams for the agency.
- Pursue cost saving measures wherever possible through technology, energy efficiencies, and workforce resources.
- Minimize risks/agency financial exposure.
- Ensure procurements undertaken to provide best value to the organization and taxpayers.

**Goal #5: Undertake initiatives that support environmental sustainability.**

**Rational:** Invest and implement those things that make sense on both environmentally and financially.

**Responsibility:** Commission (funding and policy development), and Senior Staff (assist with policy development, develop action steps and execute the plan).

**Strategies:**

- Decrease building energy use intensity by 15% by 2050.
- Achieve 100% renewable electricity by 2050.
- Zero-emission bus fleet by 2050.
- Seek opportunities to become more energy independent via solar power technologies at our facilities.
- Net-zero GHG emissions by 2050.
- Prepare facilities for electric vehicles by installing electric vehicle charging infrastructure at garage and other SWT facilities by 2030.
- Limit impervious surfaces at our facilities using raingardens, pervious pavers, etc.
- Implement and promote multimodal services such as electric carshare, bikeshare, scooters, within our operations.
- Implement a recycling program to reduce single use waste by 50% in the next three years.

**Goal #6: Maintain Operational Excellence by providing reliable, safe, comfortable transit service, which meets customers' needs and increases confidence in the overall operation.**

**Rational:** Nothing else matters if the operation does not meet the needs or expectations of the people we serve.

**Responsibility:** Commission (funding, direction setting, support and policy setting), and All Staff (assist with policy development, develop action steps and execute the plan).

**Strategies:**

- Provide the best equipment and facilities possible.
- Maintain lofty standards ensuring reliability and predictability, including:

- Maintaining on-time performance at 99% or better.
- Operate 100% of scheduled trips.
- Maintaining miles between road-calls at 1 per 48,000 miles traveled or better.
- Maintain miles between chargeable accidents at or better than .75 per every 100,000 miles traveled.
- Maintain customer satisfaction at 99% or better.
- Address all overload situations within 48 hours.
- Inspect vehicles and facilities daily.
- Ensure all schedule outlets have up-to-date information.
- Require and monitor adherence to all operating procedures (pre-trip, post –trip, pull-outs, weather starts, spare driver deployment, etc.).
- Maintain the driver compliment at 125% of current work pieces/shifts.
- Maintain street supervision practices by having a supervisor on the street for a minimum of 8 hours per day, including the "boots on the ground" practice downtown during the PM peak.
- Ensure that all drivers receive training related to bus systems and procedures, such as heating and cooling operations, farebox and AVL, lift operations, and others as needed/identified.
- Ensure all staff receives proper training to maintain proficiency in new equipment and technologies.
- Continue preventative maintenance on every vehicle at or above the recommended standards.
- Maintain/stock adequate parts to minimize any bus down-time.
- Ensure all staff meet training requirements including SWT's transit ambassador/customer service training.
- Provide regular communications to our customers, government partners, and to the general community.
- Ensure correct/up-to-date information is in our buses, at our facilities, at the schedule outlets, and on our web page.
- Ensure that the main customer service desk is fully staffed throughout the day and phones are answered in a timely manner.
- Continue to uphold those things developed by our customers, such as the "Rider Expectations and Responsibilities" and cell phone policy.
- Always promptly acknowledge customer concerns and make them understand that their opinions truly matter.
- Ensure that all staff are willing to make the extra effort for customers.

- Ensure routes are scheduled properly and operate as printed (on-time performance both start and end). This includes staying ahead of those things (weather, congestion, construction) that negatively impact on-time performance. Ensure that spares are placed into service in advance of known occurrences.
- Ensure facilities are clean and in top shape.
- Keep stations free from snow and ice during and following snowstorms.
- Update procedures manuals to remain current to job functions, responsibilities, and needs.
- Continue quality control inspections by management staff and outside personnel that both observe and document findings.
- Maintain professional relationships with vendors and contractors.
- Establish a clear vision for the agency. Communicate direction and expectations with all staff.

***Goal #7: Expand service options/initiatives that increases ridership; serve those with the greatest mobility needs; improves access to the system for everyone (equity), add value to the overall customer experience; and develop broad-based support for SouthWest Transit’s operations.***

***Rational:*** Meet the needs and expectations of the people we serve, especially as we begin to build back from the ridership losses experienced during the pandemic.

***Responsibility:*** Commission (funding, direction setting, support and policy setting), and All Staff (assist with policy development, develop action steps and execute the plan).

***Strategies:***

- Rebuild service to pre-pandemic levels. When doing this, reestablish service in a controlled manner that adapts to the new demand.
- Initiate service to new markets. Potential increases include but are not limited to: Prime and Prime MD expansions; Added late-night and Sunday Prime services; North/west 494 corridor to compliment the south/east 494 services; LRT Green Line connections in Eden Prairie and possibly Opus/Minnetonka; Expanded special Event services; Additional Suburb to Suburb connectivity, County wide service in the

Carver County as well as connections to neighboring counties to the west; Possibly add mid-morning and mid-day commuter services to address employment pattern changes.

- Develop strategic partnerships with key stakeholders as well as other providers.
- Actively seek early, continuing, and proactive public involvement to better understand our customers and our community's mobility needs.
- Continue providing community focused services.
- Plan/develop services that are mindful of equity and access for all. Actively engage diverse audiences throughout our service area.
- Support and pursue infrastructure advances that provide time advantages for transit.
- Identify and secure additional funding to implement new service initiatives.

# Appendices/Supporting Information

## ORGANIZATIONAL HISTORY

SouthWest Transit was organized in 1986 in accordance with Minnesota State Statutes, which allowed a city or group of cities meeting certain criteria to “opt-out” of the Metropolitan Transit Commission transit system and form their own transit system. At that time, Chaska, Chanhassen, and Eden Prairie chose to opt-out and create their own transit system, SouthWest Metro Transit. Eventually, nine other metro suburbs chose to do the same.

SouthWest Transit operates under a joint powers’ agreement between the three cities. The Commission was structured with seven members: three city council members, one from each community; three appointed members, one from each community; and one rider representative, a position appointed by the Commission. This structure allows the communities to maintain balanced control over the agency’s business.

The agency’s Chief Executive Officer (CEO) is appointed by the Commission to administer the day-to-day activities of SWT, including operations, finance, planning, marketing, policy development, contract negotiations, risk management, customer service, labor relations, emergency preparedness, facility management, real estate development, and human resources including the administration of personnel matters and the hiring and termination of all employees.

The CEO also must possess the ability to solve complex issues, be strategic and creative in his or her thinking, and perform multiple tasks including establishing priorities on everything from capital investments to service delivery.

## SERVICES

SouthWest Transit provides a variety of services to meet the needs of the communities we serve - Chaska, Chanhassen and Eden Prairie, Carver, and Victoria.

- *Express Service* – Provides express bus trips to Downtown Minneapolis and the University of Minnesota.
- *Reverse Commute* – SouthWest Transit operates one of the region’s oldest reverse commute programs, bringing workers from the urban core to job sites in our service area.
- *Local* – Prime and Prime MD provides community connections within our service area, and to neighboring communities such as Shakopee, Bloomington, Edina, Richfield, and St. Louis Park.
- *Special Services* – State Fair, Twins, Vikings, Gophers Football, Summer Adventures, Concerts, and seasonal services to the Minnesota Landscape Arboretum.
- *Trips* – Pre-Pandemic SouthWest Transit operated approximately 150 one-way bus trips per day and currently has a fleet of seventy-two buses.
- *Ridership* – Pre-Pandemic SouthWest Transit provided over one million passenger trips per year.
- *Discounted Fares* - SouthWest provides discounted and/or free rides to individuals challenged financially (Regional TAP and SW TAP Program)



or searching for employment through one of the job search programs offered in our communities.

## **PREVIOUS STRATEGIC PLANNING ACTIVITIES**

SouthWest Transit has guided its operations through Strategic Planning since 1998. All Strategic Plans since have addressed several critical issues facing the agency, which if ignored, could have set the agency years behind or eliminated what was once referred to as the “opt-out transit experiment.”

### **Result from previous strategic planning initiatives include:**

- Successfully addressed dismal financial situation.
- Placed internal focus on the customer, improving the perception of the operation achieving a 99% customer satisfaction in the past 10 years.
- Improved confidence of local, regional, and state governments in our operation.
- Improved service reliability of the transit operation with an on-time performance rating of 99%, and in-service breakdowns three times less than the national average.
- Established our Brand – “Premier Provider.”
- First agency to bring new vehicle types into our region such as commuter coach buses.
- First system to fully equip buses with Wi-Fi in the region.
- Reversed declining ridership and became one of the fastest growing systems in the state for five consecutive years.

- Expanded service coverage area and designed a new type of service which grew into one of the first micro-transit operating in the U.S. (Prime and Prime MD).
- Completed the first metro area transit Emergency Preparedness and Asset Management Plans.
- Developed real estate in a “Transit Oriented” fashion that generated a new revenue stream which allowed provided an opportunity to construct a new station, purchase vehicles, and expand our administrative and maintenance facility without the assistance of any state or federal resources.
- Recognized: Twice as the Minnesota Transit System of the Year; Multiple National Awards for Safety and Security; Multiple Awards for Financial Excellence; Recognized as an Employer of the Year; and received the National Transit System of the Year from the American Public Transportation Association.

## RELATIONSHIPS

### **Commission/Founding Cities**

At least one elected representative from each of the SWT communities must serve on the SouthWest Transit Commission (City Council member or Mayor from Chaska, Chanhassen, and Eden Prairie). Three other members (one from each City) will be appointed by the member cities. This additional member can but does not have to be an elected representative. The seventh member of the Commission is the “At-Large” position. This individual is selected by the six city representatives on the Commission.

The three cities are interested in SouthWest Transit for a variety of reasons:

- Stewardship of taxpayers' dollars for transit.
- Provision of transit services to aid local mobility (work trips, recreational trips, service trips, etc.).
- Contributions to reduced congestion and improved air quality by provision of an alternative to single occupancy vehicles.
- Economic stability for business in the area by providing access to job from the overall region.

### **Riders**

Our riders include specialized groups including, but not limited to, commuters to downtown, reverse commuters, senior citizens, college students, youth, and individuals needing transportation assistance or are mobility challenged. Each has special needs to be met by the transit agency.

### **Metropolitan Council**

Upon its formation, the agency automatically became part of the regional transit system, which included a variety of public and private transit agencies falling under the Metropolitan Council's oversight such as Metro Transit, Metro Mobility, the regional demand response program, the University of Minnesota system, and the five suburban transit systems including SWT.

The Metropolitan Council is responsible for the coordination of all transit services in the seven-county metropolitan area including establishing the regional fare structure for fixed route services, and managing all revenue

related to transit operations such as the state motor vehicle sales tax (MVST), regional transit capital funding provided through the state Legislature (RTC), and all federal funding including grant funds and 5307 formula funds.

To avoid duplication of services and to provide for a transit system that would best serve the region, all the systems are coordinated via regional transit policies administered through the Metropolitan Council.

### **Mn/DOT**

Mn/DOT constructs and manages Minnesota's roadways. They have goals related to congestion mitigation, air quality, travel safety and freeway improvements, and funding. Funding sources are sometimes shared by transportation and transit interests. Infrastructure improvements, such as High Occupancy Vehicle access lanes to the freeways and bus shoulders, serve both the needs of MnDOT and SouthWest Transit.

### **Other Service Providers**

SouthWest Transit coordinates services and shares issues and concerns with other suburban providers, as well as Metro Transit and private providers.