

Hennepin County Bottineau Transitway Health Impact Assessment Summary



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Introduction

How do health, transit and land use intersect? This is the question posed by the Bottineau Health Impact Assessment (HIA).

Health impact assessments are a new tool being used to consider the potential effects a proposed policy or project could have on the health of a population, and how those effects are distributed. These types of assessments are based on the principle that health starts long before illness in the environments where people live, work and play.

The Bottineau HIA looked at six health determinants. Health determinants can cover a wide variety of topics, but are generally defined as the circumstances that affect population health. For the purposes of the Bottineau HIA, the health determinants considered were:

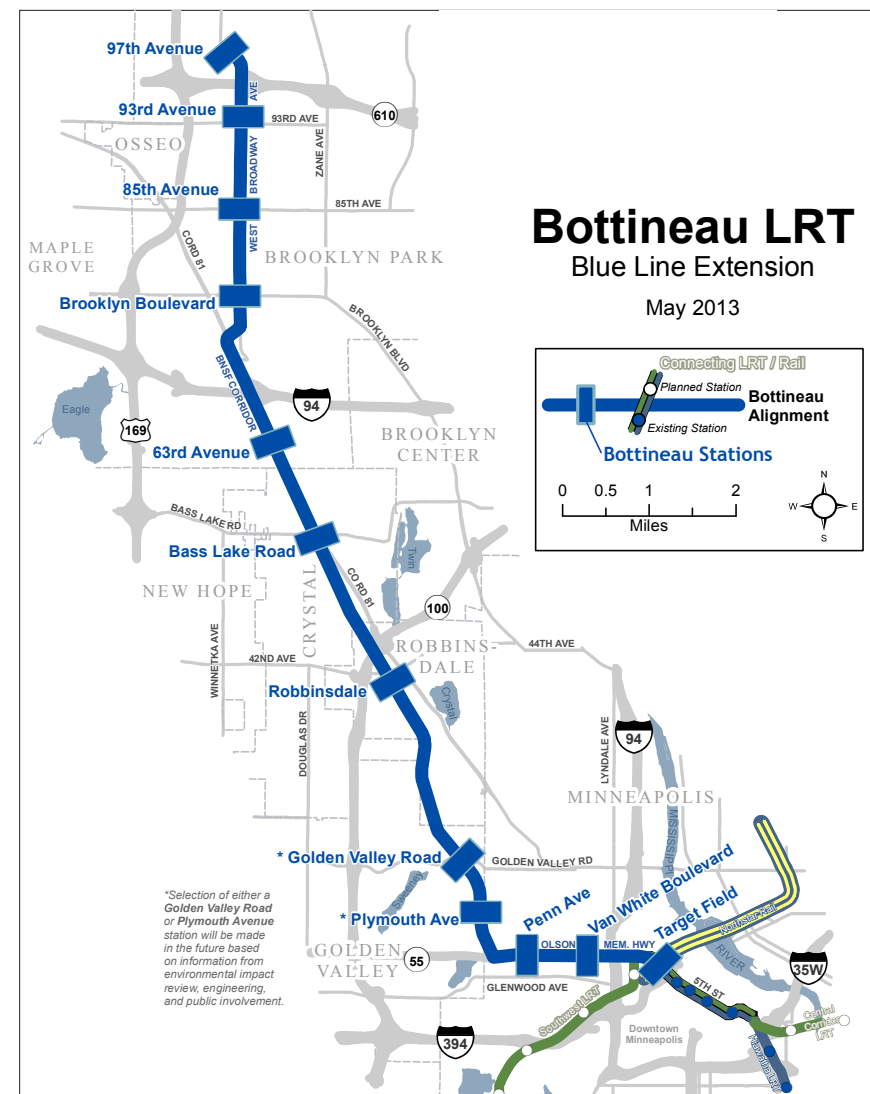
- Physical activity
- Location affordability
- Employment
- Education access
- Traffic safety
- Access to healthy food

Background

Hennepin County received funding from The Pew Charitable Trusts in 2012 to conduct a health impact assessment along the 13-mile Bottineau Transitway, the proposed route of the METRO Blue Line extension. The proposed light rail project will extend from downtown Minneapolis through North Minneapolis and the northwestern suburbs of Golden Valley, Robbinsdale, Crystal and Brooklyn Park.

A variety of outreach methods were used to gather resident input, including convening an advisory committee, stakeholder interviews and focus group discussions. The Bottineau HIA process also included extensive review of related literature, data sources and previous reports and studies conducted in the region.

The Bottineau HIA public review period is scheduled to begin July 15, and last until September 15. The final report is scheduled for completion in December. The following sections outline the draft findings of the report, but are subject to revisions depending on what responses are received during the review period.



Recommendation 4

Cities along the corridor should consider zoning, parking requirements and building codes that encourage higher density, mixed-use development.

Rationale: Higher-density, mixed-use development is more accessible for transit-dependent populations, requires less driving and can also result in better environments for walking.

Recommendation 5

Incorporate bike and pedestrian infrastructure improvements into station area plans.

Rationale: This will improve traffic safety and facilitate bike and pedestrian access to the transit stations, thereby increasing the opportunity for physical activity. Facilitating bike and pedestrian access can also improve economic growth for surrounding businesses.

Recommendation 6

Preserve existing affordable housing and support the development of affordable and mixed-income housing near transit locations using strategies that have been successful for other transit-related investments throughout the nation.

Rationale: This could also help ensure more transit-dependent, minority and low-income populations have access to the new light rail line's wide range of health-related benefits.

Summary of Draft Recommendations

The Bottineau HIA provides the rationale for a series of next steps when it comes to planning the Bottineau Transitway and surrounding station areas. These recommendations are based on three key premises:

- Enhancing the light rail line's positive impacts on health
- Enhancing access to light rail benefits for vulnerable populations
- Avoiding unintentional negative consequences of the light rail line

Recommendation 1

Conduct additional analysis to determine low-income and transit-dependent populations along the proposed route that could easily connect to light-rail via the bus or another transit service.

Rationale: This could help ensure more transit-dependent, minority and low-income populations have access to the new light rail line's wide range of health-related benefits.

Recommendation 2

Continue to engage populations living in the corridor during future phases of the light rail project, including station area planning. Incorporate engagement strategies that will reach traditionally underrepresented populations, e.g. low-income, minority, non-English speaking.

Rationale: This could result in both the light rail line and station areas better serving the needs of these communities and creating better access for them.

Recommendation 3

Cities along the corridor should target their residential and commercial growth in the station areas.

Rationale: Targeting growth in these areas will help increase transit-accessible employment opportunities and increase housing options that are associated with lower transportation costs.

Summary of Findings

The Bottineau HIA demonstrates that there is a correlation among health, transit and land use. Overall, the assessment showed the Bottineau Transitway (METRO Blue Line extension) is very likely to have more positive than negative health impacts for populations living along the corridor. The assessment also indicated benefits could be experienced by populations throughout the metropolitan region that would have access to the light rail line.

Note: The Bottineau HIA does not provide quantitative estimates of expected health outcomes. The light rail line will provide real potential to improve health in the region, but the degree to which these health-promoting benefits reach populations experiencing health disparities, such as minority and low-income populations, will depend on taking action to ensure their access to light rail.

Physical activity

Research has proven that an increase in physical activity leads to improvements in health outcomes, such as prevalence of type 2 diabetes and improved mental health. The Bottineau Transitway would likely increase physical activity because people walk to and from transit stations. Additionally, station areas often include modifications or additions to surrounding infrastructure, including bike and pedestrian options, which research shows increases levels of biking and walking. Studies also show increased access to parks impacts physical activity levels, and the light rail line would likely increase access to Theodore Wirth Park for residents at the proposed stations options on Golden Valley Road or Plymouth Avenue.

Nationally, an estimated 29 percent of transit users get 30 minutes or more (average 24 minutes) of physical activity per weekday solely by walking to and from transit.

Location affordability

Improving the affordability of where people live can improve their health outcomes in many ways, from decreased stress to preventing homelessness to freeing up household budgets for health-promoting resources including nutritious food, health care and recreational activities. By improving the level of transit service in the corridor, the Bottineau Transitway could reduce household transportation expenses, thereby improving affordable living. The light rail line also has the potential to raise property values and spur

economic development, e.g. development projects that provide more housing options in station areas. Studies have shown, however, that it is important to maintain affordable housing in station areas, because property value increases may inadvertently result in pricing out transit-dependent populations.

The biggest tradeoff working families make in balancing household budgets is between housing and transportation costs.

Employment

Unemployment rates and job quality have proven to be key factors that affect a wide range of health outcomes, from self-reported well-being to mental health and life expectancy. Currently, jobs are spread throughout the region, making it difficult and expensive for workers with limited car access to reach employment opportunities. The Bottineau Transitway will likely result in more employment opportunities for populations living in the station areas by increasing connectivity to jobs throughout the region, spurring economic growth and generating jobs in the construction and light rail operation and maintenance fields.

Census tracts indicate 37–58 percent of households in the proposed Penn Avenue and Van White station areas, and 19–24 percent of households in the proposed Robbinsdale and 63rd Avenue station areas, do not own a vehicle.

Education access

Education is a significant predictor of health outcomes, including mortality and cardiovascular disease. The Bottineau Transitway will connect riders to North Hennepin Community College and other education and vocational training institutions in the corridor, increasing education access, especially for those populations with limited car access or for whom transportation costs are a barrier to enrollment.

“I live 11 miles from the college and with my old vehicle it costs me \$8/day in gasoline. There are no transit options that will serve my area and having a car is the only reason I am able to attend college.”
NHCC Student

Traffic safety

Traffic crashes cause injuries and fatalities, and are the leading cause of death for people ages 34 and under. The Bottineau Transitway would positively impact traffic safety in three ways:

- More people riding transit means people will be using a safer mode of transportation and be less exposed to traffic crashes.
- Increased numbers of bikers and pedestrians tend to correlate with decreased rates of traffic collisions involving a biker or pedestrian.
- Station area investments in bike or pedestrian infrastructure enhancements could also reduce the risk of traffic-related injuries and fatalities for these transportation alternatives.

Among workers below poverty level in New Hope, 78 percent drive alone to work.

Access to healthy food

Good nutrition is vital to health, disease prevention and childhood development. Access to healthy food options impacts the likelihood of being able to include healthy food in a person’s diet. More research and evidence is needed to identify the link between transit service and healthy food access. However, the assessment identified the following two possibilities for improving access to healthy food in the corridor:

- The Bottineau Transitway could improve food access for transit-dependent populations if it is accompanied by station area investments that encourage the placement of healthy food vendors nearby.
- The light rail line could also help households decrease their transportation costs, freeing up more of their income for nutritious foods.

Data shows only a little more than 30 percent of North Minneapolis residents, and 32 percent of residents living in the inner ring suburbs along the Bottineau Transitway, consume adequate amounts of fruits and vegetables.