

# Northern Lights Express

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## Open House #2 Summary

Prepared for:



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# 1. Public Meeting Overview

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## 1.1 Meeting Format

Four open houses were held for the Northern Lights Express Project in February and March 2016. The purpose of these open houses was to present an update on the NLX Project including selected station and maintenance facility sites and potential layover sites, and served to kick off the Tier 2 Project Level environmental review phase.

The locations of the meetings were selected based on the future NLX station locations and the desire to provide information and receive feedback from residents and businesses in the surrounding area of each station. A meeting location in Fridley, MN was selected to attract potential users of Target Field Station and Coon Rapids Station. The meeting in Duluth, MN served to attract Duluth and Superior, WI riders. Additional meetings were held in Cambridge, MN and Hinckley, MN.

Each meeting was two hours in length and conducted in an open house format with visual display boards. Attendees were provided with the opportunity to submit written comments. Staff from the Minnesota Department of Transportation, the Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance, cities and project consultants were available to answer questions.

## 1.2 Attendance

There were 119 total attendees at the second round of open houses. Open house and attendee information are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1 – Open House Attendance**

Date/Time	Location	Attendance*
February 24, 2016 6 – 8 p.m.	Fridley Community Center <i>Fridley, MN</i>	33; 1 media
February 25, 2016 6 – 8 p.m.	Duluth Depot <i>Duluth, MN</i>	18; 3 media
February 29, 2016 6 – 8 p.m.	Cambridge City Center Mall <i>Cambridge, MN</i>	44; 0 media
March 3, 2016 6 – 8 p.m.	Hinckley Finlayson High School <i>Hinckley, MN</i>	24; 0 media

\*Attendance figures based on participants who signed in and does not include staff.

## 1.3 Notification

Notification of the open houses was provided on the NLX website, through the project email list, and through the Alliance website and email list. In addition, an open house announcement was sent to individual stakeholders in each station area, which included representatives of cities, counties, chambers of commerce, local organizations and media outlets. All stakeholders were

encouraged to forward the open house notice and to post it on agency/organization websites and social media sites. Television media outlets that covered the story included WDIO, KSTP, and Fox 21. Newspaper outlets included the Superior Telegram, Isanti County News, Duluth News Tribune, and Pine County Pioneer. Web outlets that covered the story included Prairie Business Magazine and Trains Magazine.

## 1.4 Information Presented

The boards presented at the open houses explained the purpose of the meeting and clarified the planning and design process for NLX station, layover, and maintenance facility sites. The boards also informed attendees about how they could learn, understand, and contribute more to the planning process by providing their feedback.

The general boards illustrated proposed facility and station site location plans, the design process, including the current project status, and an overview explaining the basics of NLX, who is implementing it, its purpose and its implementation timeline. Photographs illustrated the basic program elements for the station facilities (buildings, platforms, ticketing and waiting areas, parking and multi-modal access), maintenance facility (maintenance bays and workshop, train wash and support functions), and layover facilities (yard tracks). In addition, a board was presented that showed historic properties in the NLX project corridor.

Boards created for the open houses in Cambridge and Hinckley showed proposed stations in more detail.

Four handouts were provided: a summary of the board information, a project overview, frequently asked questions, and one that showed each station design concept layout. These handouts were available as a take-away to meeting attendees.

All open house boards and handouts are available on the project website: [www.mndot.gov/nlx](http://www.mndot.gov/nlx).

## 1.5 Next Steps

Over the next year, the team will complete the analysis and prepare the Tier 2 Project Level Environmental Assessment (EA). Successful completion of the Tier 2 EA will position the NLX Project to receive funding for final design and construction.

## 2. Summary of Comments

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Open house attendees were provided with a comment sheet to submit general feedback about the project.

In general, feedback received at the open houses reflects support of the NLX Project. However, at the open house in Hinckley, there was mixed support for the NLX Project.

Review of the comments received at the meeting found several common themes:

### **Fridley**

- Support for the NLX project and a hope for it to be constructed sooner rather than later
- An emphasis on keeping the train trip no longer than 2½ hours with potential for increasing the speed and shortening the trip duration in the future
- An emphasis on keeping ticket prices low to maintain high ridership

### **Duluth**

- Support for the NLX project
- A desire for evening/weekend trains to support entertainment in the cities
- Concern over the Superior station aesthetics

### **Cambridge**

- Support for the NLX project
- Some reservations about property acquisition, vibration, and traffic congestion
- Concern expressed about potential rail crossing closures
- Some concern with the project funding impacting taxpayers

### **Hinckley**

- Mixed support of the NLX project
- Overall agreement to discontinue the Hinckley Loop alternative

### 2.1 Comment Sheets

The comments below are a compilation of the written comments received from the comment sheets at each open house. Table 2 indicates the number of comment sheets submitted at each open house.

**Table 2 – Comment Sheets Submitted**

Location	Number of Comment Sheets
Fridley Community Center	11
Duluth Depot	4
Cambridge City Center Mall	7
Hinckley Finlayson High School	6

### 2.1.1 Fridley Open House Comments

- This project appears to be a well thought out increased use of existing facility with additions bringing both economic development and tourism to stops along the way in addition to the current Duluth tourist trade. I fully support this effort and look forward to being a passenger.
- I think the concept is great and I look forward to being able to ride to Duluth! Will there be a bistro car/bar car? I also think you should/could better highlight the permanent job creation of the project. How much will tickets cost?
- I think this is a great project with many benefits. A couple thoughts: It's important to keep the trip no longer than two hours and 30 minutes to encourage people to use. If it creeps to three hours, people will opt to drive. I suggest future open house in Minneapolis (not suburbs).
- I do support this project, but I do have a concern that other people will be less supportive of the NLX line with its top speed reduced from 110 MPH to 90 MPH. Sure it does make the line less expensive with no significant track upgrades, but now the travel time to go from the Twin Cities to Duluth will be the same if not slightly slower than if it was done by a vehicle on I-35. Ninety MPH is not really "high speed rail" in my eyes compared to the true high speed rail lines in Europe and Japan which are often traveling over 200 MPH. So I would prefer that the 90 MPH speed limit be viewed as a temporary speed limit (lasting 10-15 years) and make a goal of upgrading the line to 125 MPH or more when the support and costs/benefits are good. Otherwise, continue pointing out the positives of what the line will certainly bring (relaxation, increase work productivity, etc.) to make the relatively affordable price (\$500-600 million) a really worthwhile investment. Good Luck!
- The proposed route map with legacy landmarks could have been large and more legible, really had to lean in to read it. From a mobility and development perspective, I hope this happens in my lifetime. I am 31 now and I hope we aren't still talking about it 30 years from now. Best of luck with the analysis and hope to ride when it is built.
- I am not entirely clear on the reasoning behind the potential maintenance facility at Sandstone. End-of-line facilities simply are most logical from a logistical standpoint. Question to answer as this project moves along, will the Coon Rapids/Foley station also serve as a station for Northstar?
- I support NLX. It will serve several communities that need improved public transportation.
- Great plan. I will use this train to Duluth. What can be done to build this quicker?
- Please study the idea of adding one weekend auto-trains to access the huge number of riders for whom Twin Cities to Duluth is just dead time, but for whom there is and will be no other way to reach their destination beyond Duluth except by using their own car. Politically proposing auto-trains round trip to Duluth on weekends can help sell this project. There would be significant benefits getting additional cars off I-35 on Fridays and Saturdays (if possible) and Sundays. Otherwise, NLX will not attract riders who are going north of Duluth. If an NLX that could carry passengers and their cars, like Amtrak's East Coast, an auto-train that attracts 200 unique passenger fares plus 100 automobiles per weekend run, would it be worth the investment? At what patronage level would this idea be worth studying/implementing? The politics of funding NLX will not be easy. Offering weekend auto-trains could add some votes in the legislature, I believe. I am 67. Coming years will see a huge demographic of seniors who can drive the last mile, but don't want to drive the freeway to Duluth!
- I am in strong support of this project. As a college student, I see a lot of trends in my generation. One of those trends is the want/need to drive less. More and more people are trying to find alternative ways to get places. One of those alternatives that people are very interested in again is trains. This route will not only serve college students, but job growth in

small towns too. Development and growth in Minneapolis and Duluth as well. In order for this line to be very successful, it will need to have room to grow. By that, I mean grow by speed. Ninety MPH won't cut it forever. It will also need reasonable ticket prices. Prices around \$40-\$60 (round trip) would be perfect.

### 2.1.2 Duluth Open House Comments

- I travel to Minneapolis about once a month. Sometimes for fun and sometimes to use the airport. I very much support this project to provide rail service to the Twin Cities. If the travel time is as fast as or faster than driving, I will use the service often. Thanks!
- All for it!
- I feel strongly that a train should depart Minneapolis late at night (11pm or so) to allow folks to attend concerts and other night life. Perhaps a Fridley, MN orchestra special. The orchestra might be a partner. I was one of five people on a church committee that met for dinner on a Friday night. We discovered in the course of conversation that all five of us were driving to the cities the next day, most of us for the day. I strongly support this project!
- Being that Superior's stop is a bit off from the downtown in an area that feels like "rail yards," I am most concerned that unattractive aesthetics will reinforce Superior's image problem as the uglier and inferior city of the Twin Ports. That image problem directly affects Superior's ability to attract residents and investment. Although aesthetics is important for every stop, it is most critical for Superior. My other concern would be that there is good pedestrian wayfinding between Superior's station and Tower Avenue that is an intuitive, safe, and attractive pedestrian experience.

### 2.1.3 Cambridge Open House Comments

- Has a study been done on the vibrations in Northern Anoka/ Southern Isanti County? We lived in Anoka proper years ago, about as far from the tracks as we do now in Athens township. Never felt vibrations in Anoka, but our house shakes in Athens. We believe the type of sound and the substrate have a lot to do with that. Anoka has a rockier substrate; whereas, Athens and North Anoka county have more of a swampy/marsh substrate. Also, there are three crossings within three miles of us. We use all three all of the time. Each of them would cut us off from a different town or city if closed.
- When are we going to have the train going thru Cambridge? It is badly needed!
- Wheelchair accessibility, snow removal, security, crime in general
- I am excited to hear about this project. Believe it is needed, but I hope funding can come in ways that don't heavily burden the people of the state. Key points for me: Discounted rates for seniors and students (many travel back and forth for family reasons). Safety in the track system because of the speed of the train. Reasonable travel rates to keep ridership available to all. Sensitivity to historical and environmental issues (well done so far)
- Will there be rental cars available in Duluth? If I take a train to Duluth, I will want to rent a car.
- Please build this... Yesterday!!
- My family fully supports this project. We will ride these trains and connecting trains into the next generation. I think it would be helpful if the NLX trains could connect with future Amtrak trains to St. Paul, Chicago and Fargo, etc. A good future Minneapolis station site would be at BNSF's Minneapolis junction (Harrison Street Wye area). This would have a lot of space for future expansion. It would also speed operations by eliminating the need for back-up movements. There is no room at Target Field! It is vital to secure trackage rights over the BNSF Midway Sub all the way to St. Paul Union Depot and also over the Minnesota Commercial

Railroad and CP Railway as an alternate route to the St. Paul Union Depot. The Minnesota Commercial RR might be willing to offer space for maintenance facilities for both NLX trains and future AMTRAK trains to Chicago and Fargo, ND rather than Sandstone or Duluth.

### 2.1.4 Hinckley Open House Comments

- This proposed train does not serve the residents of Pine County. It will be subsidized more and more each year. Why would anyone give up their own transportation to ride a train that doesn't take them to their final destination? What happened to the actual ridership survey done in 2014? I think it's safe to say the responses couldn't be spun to fit what MnDOT/NLX Alliance wants. Pine County residents tell me they won't go to Target Field or Duluth on a train. This county, poor as it is, will suffer greatly with this proposed project. Why are we or why would we want to take a step backward in transportation? We want our independence. Rail didn't work before. We should not be building trains for the benefit of non-taxpaying businesses.
- I am so excited!! It's about time. We need more public transportation and a train would be such a great start. Thank you, Thank you! Good Luck with this project. It's an answer to many people's dreams.
- My suggestion is to sell "naming rights" or advertising on station facilities or even rail cars themselves as Metro Transit does, as one source of funding. Especially at the Hinckley Station, perhaps Grand Casino might be willing to pay for part or all of the station construction cost if they could place their logo and name on the station, "Hinckley – Grand Casino Station." Hope you can make a deal with Grand Casino and other advertisers.
- This billion-dollar boondoggle should never have made it out of the outhouse it was conceived in and everybody knows it! There is no economic stimulus to be delivered and neither of the cities at each end need it. Small town Minnesota will never see any benefit. As I see it, the plan is to get a basic no frills train/track up and running; then it will be enhanced at a tremendous cost to get it up to the original plan with a dedicated track and casino loop, because the argument will be the train needs it all to survive. Kill it now and it won't need life support! The U.S. Transportation system needs two trillion dollars to get it up to snuff! Eighty thousand bridges need to be replaced! There's economic stimulus that this thing will never haul! What is needed is light rail from St. Paul and Minneapolis to Forest Lake right now, then passenger or light rail can be legged north. This whole project is senseless. This project will be obsolete in ten years because the hyper loop system will make it so!
- No [Hinckley] Loop is necessary on the outside of Hinckley. Station proposed near the school is too tight and close to the school. Really no need for the train going 90 MPH; people will drive. Drive-less cars will be here before the train can be built. Taxpayers can't support this program.
- How are you going to save time on the train when you can drive from the cities to Duluth in 2.5 hours? Fares are going to cost 36 bucks one-way; you can drive for that. Kids don't want to drive, who are you kidding? For the money spent studying the train, we could have put another lane on I-35. What a waste of taxpayer dollars.

## 2.2 Staff Comments

The following comments were gathered and recorded by NLX staff and consultants at the open houses:

### 2.2.1 Fridley

- Questions about how NLX and Northstar Commuter Rail would work together.

- Members of All Aboard Minnesota in attendance noted they were very excited about the project and noted interest in the Duluth station.
- Several attendees asked questions about timing, ticket prices, when service would begin and funding sources.

### 2.2.2 Duluth

- General support for the train and comments about the need for weekend service.
- Multiple attendees expressed eagerness for the train to be up and running.
- Several attendees expressed concern about how riders would be able to get to the Duluth Transit Center from the station and if the tracks can be extended another two blocks.
- Most supported the Depot station location overall.
- A couple attendees asked questions about why the station is at track level; this makes it less accessible.
- Concerns about the long walk from parking lot on the south side of the Depot.
- Concern about the dark and uninviting atmosphere under the 5<sup>th</sup> Street bridge.
- Concern about having enough parking if some had to be removed for track.
- Request to not interfere with the Scenic Railroad service.

### 2.2.3 Cambridge

- Some attendees asked about necessary property acquisition north of the City Center Mall.
- A few attendees expressed concern about the train blocking crossings and causing traffic congestion while it is stopped at the platform.
- Questions about amenities; e.g., if the train would have bike racks.
- General support for the project and in particular support for the station being located at the City Center Mall.
- Concern about vibration from trains; a person who lives half-mile away says her computer monitor in her home vibrates whenever there are passing trains now.
- Multiple attendees expressed concern about closure of rail crossings; residents near the Anoka/Isanti County line say they currently use three crossings that they are worried will be closed and leave them without efficient access.
- Concern that the train will bring in people who want to commit crimes.
- Comment about wanting to get to Union Depot in St. Paul so they can catch the Empire Builder.
- Suggestion to build a station at Minneapolis junction so riders can get off and catch Northstar or Empire Builder.
- Comment that they hope the station will stimulate development in downtown.
- One person works in St. Paul and uses car, bus and train to get there. He is anxious for a station in Cambridge.
- An attendee commented that she had a negative reaction to the price cut announcement in December because she thought that meant the project had been full of fluff originally.
- Several attendees asked questions about ticket prices, time of trip and second tracks not interfering with freight.

- Question from a firefighter on if the parking lot access would be improved.

### 2.2.4 Hinckley

- Mixed support of the project.
- Concern about roadway congestion at crossings.
- Concern about the proximity of the school and student safety.
- Concern about the sources of funding – residents are worried they will have to pay for it or that the state will ask for more money in the future.
- Comment that the scale of the station buildings is too grand and shouldn't be enclosed.
- Local property taxes are going to end up paying for the train. Residents can't afford that.
- Overall comments that NLX would be great for seniors who need to get to Minneapolis or Duluth for medical appointments, but aren't able to drive. Train would at least get riders to the city, although they would still need rides to their final destination.
- Several attendees expressed concern that the casino loop will happen as soon as the train is up and running. Additional comments that the proposed loop route would cut through farms and restrict access.
- Comment that people without internet access don't receive notice about NLX project meetings (scheduled public meetings or cancelled NLX Alliance meetings).

## 3.0 Additional Public Comments Received

In addition to comments received at the four public meetings, three emails and one mailed comment sheet were also submitted in February and March 2016.

- Email #1 was from a couple in Savage who noted they are in support of NLX; however, they are unable to attend the open houses as they are too far away. They would like to see meetings held further south for the next round of open houses so they are more accessible.
- Email #2 was from a resident who used to ride the train to the Twin Cities. He noted he does not see a need for implementing the NLX project.
- Email #3 was from a meeting attendee who noted he was in favor of the NLX project before the speed was reduced to 90 mph. He feels the lower speed makes the line less encouraging to use. He also noted that he feels the Superior station should be removed to save travel time and costs.
- Mailed comment #1 was from an attendee at the Hinckley open house. She noted she strongly supports the NLX project.