

New light rail cars will be more Minnesota-friendly

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Metro Transit orders 12 for Hiawatha fleet

As Metro Transit receives the new light rail transit cars for the Twin Cities' Central Corridor line over the next two years, the agency also will expand the fleet for the existing Hiawatha LRT.

Adding 12 more cars to the Hiawatha will help keep pace with LRT ridership that continues to grow ahead of projections, officials said.

The second-generation cars, which are being manufactured by Siemens Inc. in Sacramento, Calif., will gradually join the Hiawatha line's 27-car fleet, said Rich Rovang, director of the Central Corridor project. The Central Corridor will connect the downtowns of Minneapolis and St. Paul.

Metro Transit, which wants to improve the readability of maps and schedules, is rebranding the Hiawatha line as the Blue Line and the Central Corridor route as the Green Line.

Last year, when the Metropolitan Council awarded Siemens the \$102 million contract for the initial 31-car Green Line fleet, the regional planning agency also ordered 10 cars for the Blue Line and was able to increase that by exercising an option for two additional cars.

Having a bigger fleet for the Hiawatha means Metro Transit eventually would run three-car trains rather than today's mix of two- and three-car trains, said Sheri Gingerich, deputy chief of operations for Metro Transit.

Running three-car trains reduces traffic interruptions along the LRT lines. It will also mean putting fewer miles per year on each car — from the current average of 75,000 miles per year to 58,000 miles, Gingerich noted.

The cars in the first-generation Hiawatha fleet, which began running in 2004 between the Mall of America in Bloomington and downtown Minneapolis, were manufactured by Montreal-based Bombardier Inc.

The first 24 LRT cars were ordered in 2001 and cost about \$2.8 million each. A second order of three vehicles was placed in 2005; these were about \$3.2 million each, said Metro Transit spokesman John Siqveland.

The new cars cost about \$3.35 million apiece. Before ordering the cars, Metro Transit officials went over the vehicle specs from Siemens and sought more than 1,000 modifications from the manufacturer, Gingerich said.

One of the most important changes has been making car exteriors and components more resistant to the ravages of Minnesota winters, she said. That includes using stainless steel components that won't rust because of road salt; more durable hydraulic hoses; and better heaters to keep couplers free of snow and ice.



According to Metro Transit, the new rail cars for the Hiawatha LRT will include better braking technology, better heating and cooling systems, video cameras replacing the operators' side mirrors, and adding audio capability to the video surveillance cameras in each car. (Submitted rendering: Metro Transit)

The newer cars also will reflect technological advances since the original fleet was built nearly a decade ago, Gingerich said. The advances include better braking technology, better heating and cooling systems, video cameras replacing the operators' side mirrors, and adding audio capability to the video surveillance cameras in each car.

The new cars will also have a different color scheme: blue and yellow rather than the current gray, black and yellow. The entire fleet will be repainted to match.

It takes the better part of a year to manufacture each car, including forging major steel components, welding, sandblasting and painting, Rovang said. Four cars a month will be delivered by rail as they are completed.

LRT cars have a life expectancy of 30 years, although some can last 50 years with scheduled overhauls, Gingerich said.

Metro Transit has had to schedule each car's mid-life overhaul about three years earlier than originally anticipated because Hiawatha ridership each year has exceeded the original projections. The Hiawatha exceeded the projected 2020 total by 26 percent in 2008, 23 percent in 2009, 29 percent in 2010 and 27 percent in 2011, Siqveland said.

Last year, the Hiawatha line carried 10.4 million passengers, a decline of 55,000 from 2010's record total. Average weekday ridership was 30,922 trips. Officials attributed the drop to fewer special events downtown.

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