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Northern Lights Express

Frequently Asked Questions

ABOUT NLX

The Northern Lights Express is a proposed high speed intercity passenger rail project to provide rail service between Minneapolis and Duluth. NLX service would operate on approximately 152 miles of existing BNSF railway track.

The NLX Project is being managed by the Minnesota Department of Transportation in consultation with the Federal Railroad Administration, and with cooperation from the Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance, Wisconsin Department of Transportation, and local communities.

NORTHERN LIGHTS EXPRESS PROJECT

What is the Northern Lights Express?

The Northern Lights Express is a proposed high speed intercity passenger rail service that would operate between Minneapolis and Duluth on approximately 152 miles of railroad track within an existing BNSF railway track.

What agency is responsible for the planning and implementation of the Northern Lights Express?

Planning and implementation of the Northern Lights Express is being managed by the Minnesota Department of Transportation in consultation with the Federal Railroad Administration and with cooperation from the Minneapolis-Duluth/Superior Passenger Rail Alliance, Wisconsin Department of Transportation, and local communities.

What is the purpose of the Northern Lights Express?

The purpose of the NLX Project is to provide a means to meet transportation needs through creating a passenger rail service linking Minneapolis and Duluth, connecting with other existing and planned transportation systems.

The NLX Project seeks to introduce a new intercity passenger rail service that would be reliable and cost effective, offer a new transportation connection, and provide greater intermodal connectivity.

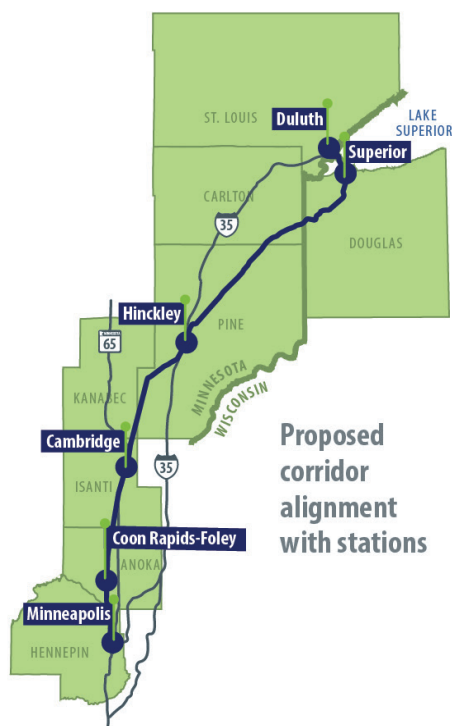
What is high speed intercity passenger rail service?

High speed intercity passenger rail service operates between two distinct metropolitan areas on shared or dedicated rights of way at speeds equal to or greater than 90 mph. Service is provided throughout the day.

How does intercity passenger rail service differ from commuter rail service?

Commuter rail service, such as Northstar Commuter Rail, is local short distance passenger rail service operating on existing rail corridors between a central city and adjacent suburbs with schedules oriented toward providing service inbound to the central city in the morning and outbound to the suburbs in the afternoon.

NLX CORRIDOR MAP



What is the Northern Lights Express Project?

The NLX Project includes all activities that need to happen in order to begin NLX Service including planning; environmental review; engineering; design; procurement of equipment; and completion of all necessary agreements and construction of the infrastructure, including stations, required to implement daily train service.

Where are proposed NLX stations going to be located?

Stations are proposed for Minneapolis, Coon Rapids, Cambridge, Hinckley, and Duluth in Minnesota and Superior in Wisconsin.

How fast will NLX travel?

Wherever possible, track will be improved to allow a maximum speed of 90 mph for passenger trains. Actual speed will vary by location based upon track geometry, adjacent land use and other factors.

How long will it take to travel between Minneapolis and Duluth on NLX?

Travel time between Minneapolis and Duluth is anticipated to be around 2½ hours.

How frequently will NLX run?

It is anticipated that there will be four roundtrips scheduled at convenient times throughout the day, allowing riders to travel and conduct business in Minneapolis or Duluth as part of a single-day trip. The final determination of NLX's schedule will be based on the Financial and Ridership Study, which will be completed by the end of 2016.

How much will it cost to ride NLX?

Fares are estimated to cost approximately \$30 one-way and \$60 round-trip from Minneapolis to Duluth.

What are the benefits of this high speed intercity passenger rail project?

NLX will provide an alternative to car or air travel that is convenient, less stressful and allows passengers to work, socialize, read and activities while traveling. NLX would also provide a transportation option for those unable to drive or for those who prefer passenger rail because of the convenience.

How will the travel time of NLX compare to car or air travel?

NLX travel time is anticipated to be comparable to car travel and comparable to air travel when time for security, boarding and disembarking is included.

Will new railroad tracks be built for NLX?

NLX will operate primarily on existing track owned by the BNSF Railway. New track may be needed to extend existing sidings, create new sidings or create double track sections. Any new track will be alongside existing track and within the existing BNSF right of way.

What is the BNSF Railway?

The BNSF Railway is a private railroad company that provides primarily freight rail service over tracks that it owns, leases or shares with other railroad companies. Although most of the rail traffic on BNSF tracks is freight, BNSF does provide passenger rail service in such places as Chicago and Seattle. BNSF also operates the Northstar Commuter rail service that travels between Minneapolis and Big Lake in Minnesota under contract to Metro Transit.

What other facilities will be required to operate NLX?

NLX will require a layover facility to park trains overnight and a light maintenance facility to perform routine maintenance and minor repairs. These facilities may be on separate sites in Sandstone and Duluth, or co-located on one site in Duluth.

What is the anticipated cost to construct, operate and maintain?

The total cost to establish reliable, daily, high-speed inter-city passenger rail service on this route, including infrastructure improvements and train equipment is estimated between \$500 million and \$600 million. Once the Northern Lights Express train is operational, current estimates put operating and maintenance costs at \$17.5 million per year for the first five years. Revenue from fares is expected to cover most of this cost, with an anticipated subsidy of between \$3 million and \$5 million per year, for the first five years, and will drop over time as ridership grows.

Who will pay for the construction of the NLX Project?

Funding for final design and construction of the NLX Project and future operation of NLX Service will not be determined until the completion of the preliminary engineering and environmental review of the Project, which is anticipated in mid-2017. Future funding may come from public sources (federal and state), private investment or a combination of the two.

Who will own and maintain NLX?

The BNSF Railway will retain ownership of the track that NLX would use. MnDOT will own and maintain facilities constructed specifically for the NLX Project. In some cases, MnDOT may lease facilities owned by other public agencies. MnDOT will also own and maintain the locomotives and coaches.

What is happening right now?

MnDOT is currently finalizing preliminary engineering and the Tier 2 Project Level Environmental Assessment document. The preliminary engineering and EA phase of the project is anticipated to be completed by the end of June 2017.

What happens after preliminary engineering and environmental review is complete?

Upon completion of preliminary engineering and the Tier 2 environmental review, the project will be eligible to apply for federal funding to enter into final design and construction.

When would construction of NLX begin?

The initiation of final design and construction depends upon the availability of funding.

When will NLX service begin?

If funding is available when needed, service could begin as early as 2020.

HINCKLEY LOOP FEASIBILITY STUDY

What is the status of the NLX Hinckley Loop Feasibility Study?

The feasibility study completed for the NLX Project in 2007 suggested that providing a direct connection to the Grand Casino Hinckley could increase overall NLX ridership and revenues. The Hinckley Loop was a proposed route studied by MnDOT and examined whether relocating a planned station from downtown Hinckley to the Grand Casino Hinckley, two miles east, would add substantial rides and revenue to the overall system.

The study was completed in early 2016 and, despite the projected increase in rides and revenue, the study recommended that the Hinckley Loop Option be deferred due to the 15% increase to the overall project costs that it would add and reduction of the benefit-cost ratio. MnDOT has recommended that the NLX project move forward with the Hinckley station located in downtown Hinckley.

STAKEHOLDER/PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

Who are NLX Project stakeholders?

NLX Project stakeholders are interested in the outcomes of the project. Stakeholders may include: residents, business owners, property owners, future riders, elected officials, members of organizations with an interest in the project, and local, state and federal agencies.

How will people know that their concerns are being heard?

Project staff will track changes made to the project's design and budget due to stakeholder input on the project. This information will be shared on the project website as the NLX Project and NLX Hinckley Loop Study proceed.

Will future meetings for the NLX Project or Hinckley Loop Study offer time for staff and project sponsors to dialogue with stakeholders, property owners, and other people interested in the project?

Yes. Project staff will use a number of formats for public meetings to facilitate a range of activities and conversations. Regardless of format, staff will always be available to answer questions and discuss the project with attendees.

How do we learn about the project and future meetings or provide feedback?

Please sign up for project email updates including upcoming meetings under "connect with us" on the NLX website at www.mndot.gov/nlx. You can also email the project at nlx.dot@state.mn.us, or visit the project website for more information. Feedback on the project can be submitted via email, on the website or by phone: 651-366-3194.

RAILROAD GRADE CROSSINGS

What are rail grade crossings?

Rail grade crossings are locations where a roadway crosses railroad tracks at the same level rather than crossing above or below the tracks. A rail grade crossing can either be on public or private land. Public crossings are roadways under the jurisdiction of a public agency, such as a state, county or city highway/public works department. Private crossings are where the roadway is privately owned; for example, a residential driveway, an access road to an industrial plant or a roadway on farmland.

How many rail grade crossings are in the NLX corridor?

In the NLX corridor, there are 125 public and 44 private rail grade crossings.

Will the NLX Project impact rail grade crossings?

The rail grade crossings in the existing BNSF corridor were originally designed for freight trains traveling at relatively slow speeds. For passenger trains traveling at speeds up to 90 MPH, like NLX, crossing warning devices, and possibly the roadway, will need to be upgraded to maintain rail, roadway, and pedestrian safety.

How can rail grade crossings be improved?

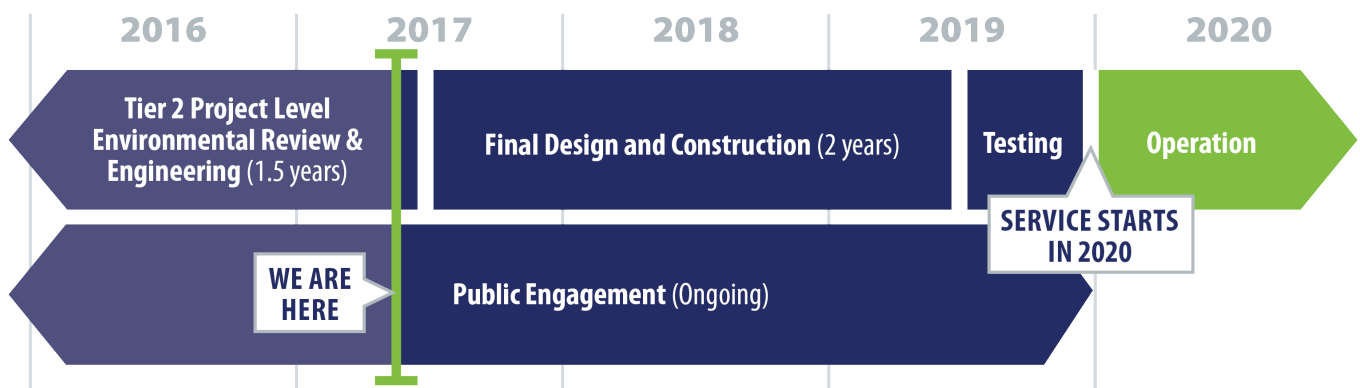
Grade crossing improvements depend on the characteristics of the crossing. The most effective grade crossing improvement is to provide grade separation, but this is only practical where traffic volume is high. MnDOT will also study where a crossing can be closed, but this will only occur where other reasonable routes to cross the tracks are available and access to property can be maintained in some other way.

Other grade crossing improvements include installing warning devices. The NLX Project is considering active warning devices: automatic gate systems, flashing-light signals and advanced warning flashers. These active warning devices along with passive devices, such as signs and pavement markings, help communicate to drivers and pedestrians on how they should react at a grade crossing.

Specific types of grade crossing systems include dual gates with flashers either with or without a non-mountable median and a four-quadrant gates system with gates on both the right and left sides of the road to block the entire roadway. Medians are effective in discouraging motorists from driving around dropped gates.

Dual gates with flashers is the minimum investment being recommended for NLX project crossings. Grade crossing warning devices will be recommended during the Tier 2 Project Level environmental review phase of the project, which will conclude in spring 2017.

Schedule Timeline



Additional Questions or Comments?

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