

Hon. James Oberstar, U.S. Representative, 1975-2011

Interviewed by Peter Myers at St. John the Evangelist Episcopal Church, St. Paul,
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Q What are your earliest memories of University Avenue?

A My earliest memories of University Avenue were my freshman year at St. Thomas College, as it was then, all the way through senior year and then some years afterward when I returned to St. Paul and to the Twin City area. But the streetcar recalled memories that I'd heard from seniors on the Iron Range of the streetcar that we had that went from Keewatin, Nashua, Keewatin, Hibbing, Chisholm, Buel, Mountain Iron, all the way across to Virginia and Eveleth, that offered a means of transportation for people who couldn't afford cars and who yet needed to go places to work or to visit family or to picnic. And they had this streetcar. Then after the war, World War II, it was pulled out. Then I went to St. Thomas College and I said, oh this is what it was like. And I couldn't afford a bus ride, I couldn't afford a taxi to go to a movie downtown Minneapolis on a Saturday night maybe once a month, about all I could afford. Or to go downtown Minneapolis, meet friends and just have a beer – not legally – but there was the streetcar that took us there. And it was reliable and it was safe and it had such great memories. You knew that this was a liberating means of transportation.

Q What role do you think transit corridors play in economic and civic life of metropolitan areas?

A It's back to the future. It's going back to our storied past, to create a new future for urban America. Urban centers account for 15% of the highway mileage of our national highway system, but 50% of the vehicle miles traveled. They account for the major part of the congestion cost that we experience in America today. Every year the Texas Transportation Institute and the University of Minnesota Center for Transportation Studies combine to use a computer model to evaluate the congestion tax, I call it, for the 75 major metropolitan areas. For last year, that was nearly \$90 billion, meaning people are spending two to four weeks more in their automobile per year than they would if they could drive at posted highway speeds. Buy four to five tanks of gasoline more than they would if they could drive at posted speeds. And wasting fuel and time and just try to get a plumber – we'll be there between 8 and noon. They used to make 8 calls a day; now they're making four. Or an electrician or any other household need. Why? Because of congestion. And the more cars you can take off the road, the more mobility our urban centers will enjoy and bringing back the streetcar – or as we call it today, light rail – is our key to unlocking the congestion of urban America. And the Hiawatha light rail is one great example of it. The central corridor will be the re-creation in modern times of the University Avenue streetcar and people will see what a great transformation it will make in their lives. But it will be more than just minimizing congestion or diminishing congestion. It will also be an economic rebirth. Give you the example of Dallas, Texas: for twenty years the idea of a light rail in Dallas was resisted, opposed. Finally the community broke through that opposition and began and completed the construction of Dallas Area Rapid Transit West. Twenty miles generated a billion dollars in private sector capital investment clustered around the 20 stops of the DART system. Emboldened by this, the city began DART East – another 20 mile segment. Before they put a shovel in the ground \$120 million in private sector capital investment was announced clustered around the anticipated stops – office complexes, apartment

buildings, shopping centers and grocery stores and all the amenities that people want because they want to be close to a convenient means of transportation. And now you have north and south and east and west and 40% of all travel in the heartland of Dallas is on the Metro System. In Denver there is a circulator system that the city says to its visitors: ride it free, ride it on us. Keep your car out of the downtown area. Keep your pollution and your congestion out of the downtown area and ride the Denver streetcar free. In Portland, Oregon, they have a downtown circulator system that is essentially a streetcar. It stops at every street corner. You get on and off as many times as you want, free. The streetcar then connects with the Max Line in Portland out of a certain zone, then you begin to pay. But you can take it all the way out to the airport. It takes you right into the airport, just as the Hiawatha does. But it is a dedicated line. And it has minimized the congestion in Portland and allowed the city to adopt ordinances that prohibit any new parking facilities in the center of Portland. And that require office facilities when they're remodeling or when builders are constructing new facilities to have street-level shops so that the city is walkable, accessible by their circulator system and by their Max Line. That is the new face of America. We're recreating the future built on past experience of the streetcar. And I think that is the transformation that we'll see with the Central Corridor. But as the community progresses forward with it, its important to do what you're doing – remember that history, establish that history, anchor us in our past so we can better appreciate the future to which we are trending.

Q How did the Central Corridor rise to the top of the desirability index in the FTA's decision-making?

A It was a combination of excellent planning, community cooperation, of neighborhood group participation, it was the attractiveness of light rail, streetcar system that would serve this great University center – one of the great universities in America – making student travel more convenient, more accessible, and also accessibility to businesses located in the corridor. All of these were pulled together, I think, in a very creative way for review by the Federal Transit Administration, but further the notion of linking the heart of St. Paul, the heart of Minneapolis, drawing two cities together – I know from my own experience that it has taken longer to drive from downtown St. Paul to downtown Minneapolis than to fly from Duluth to the Twin Cities. The idea that you will make travel more convenient, that you will knit neighborhoods together, that you will create greater access for the student population and that you will concentrate economic development along those stops and give greater weight to this project was a very important factor. But it took longer for the latter to gain acceptance with the FTA than one might think because the previous administration – the Bush administration – introduced a new concept that has no basis in federal law, and that was the competitiveness index. There was no authority for them to say, well cost effectiveness and competitiveness as a transportation system – there was no grounding in federal...there was no authority to apply such a standard. Yet they did it and it dragged this project, and many others, out much longer and in the end cost more from the standpoint of rising construction costs, rising equipment costs, that delayed this project at least a year and a half, maybe two years longer than it should have taken to reach the full funding grant agreement stage of the project. That's done with. That's over with. Future projects are going to be judged in a much different light. But the cost effectiveness index rating of projects did not take into account the factors I cited a moment ago about the downtown Dallas project. The value of economic development was not taken into consideration. That's a general community benefit and some communities, now, are considering a revenue stream from those developments,

engaging developers who stand to benefit from the construction of the line and its operation, to contribute a portion of their revenues in the future to deferring the cost of the transit development. And that is a constructive and a beneficial and a futuristic way of looking at the development of streetcars and light rail and commuter rail projects.

Q Are there a number of other cities who are lined up to get federal support to implement new light rail systems?

A Oh, there are a number of cities all across America. One that's right on the heels of Central Corridor is Honolulu Light Rail. They've been working on that for 20 years. It's taken shape more specifically in just the last seven or eight years and I've been engaged with that project with mayor, then mayor Mufi Hannemann and now governor Neal Abercrombie. Honolulu has a high premium – all of Hawaii does – on land. Island state, land is at a premium – you have volcanoes, you have a very narrow space between the Pacific Ocean and businesses, communities, residential areas. So they planned an elevated project so that you don't have the conflict at intersections and so that the footprint of the light rail would be much smaller than a street-based project. The rail will just simply cross over the intersection rather than having to tunnel, which costs upwards of a million or \$2 million or install grade crossing mechanisms, which cost in the range of \$150, \$200,000 dollars. They saved an enormous amount of cost and they will connect downtown Honolulu with the western part of the city that has the only space for economic development, industrial development and housing compact growth of condos and apartments and townhouses. It's a very, very well thought out project. Another that's in the works is Boise, Idaho. Several years ago the mayor and city council of Boise asked me to come and look at what they were planning to do. The first portion of that look was a helicopter ride from over downtown Boise out into the countryside and up into the hills surrounding the city, where the streetcar ran until 1950 – from the 1880s. You start your trip downtown with your family and go into a recreation area – a beautiful wooded area for a family picnic. Or a little further to a wedding chapel. And a little further on, to the cemetery. You're married and buried all on the streetcar line. And in this helicopter flight over you could see where the track bed once was located, or still existed – rails pulled up, track pulled up. But what has happened? In the post-WW II embrace of the automobile, Boise – which is sort of in a bowl – has a green haze, a green yellowish haze hanging over it from the auto exhaust. They want to clear up the air, they want to recreate the lifestyle that was popular, and new economic development opportunities. So they're at work on recreating the streetcar. St. Louis, Missouri, was very keen on developing a light rail project and one that would also have an extension across the river into Illinois Scott Airforce Base, which could be a reliever for St. Louis airport facility. It was derided for years. Skeptics blew cold water on it and yet the city developers went forward with it. It was projected to have 12,000 riders a day. Today it's over 52,000 riders a day. Every new light rail start has more than tripled its original projections of usage, and transit in America is attracting a million new riders a day nationwide. People are making that choice themselves. For 367 million new transit trips last year, 10.2 billion transit rides in America, there is a transit revival in this country – bus, high speed bus systems, rapid transit bus operations, light rail, commuter rail, streetcars, circulator systems – because people have had it with the congestion and the choking of urban America.

Q How do you see the Central Corridor fitting into a larger national surface transportation plan....

A The connection with Union Station is a critical element here. It is an anchor on one side of Minneapolis, its an anchor on the other side, the nexus of the central corridor, Hiawatha light rail, Northstar commuter rail, eventually the Northern Lights Express project that will connect with 110 mph service to Duluth, and then at Union Station you just recreate Amtrak. Amtrak does serve there, but a high speed Amtrak which was intended with the Obama high speed rail initiative to connect Chicago, Milwaukee, Madison, western Wisconsin through either LaCrosse or Eau Claire into Minnesota. Unfortunately for the time being the current governor of Wisconsin has rejected the high-speed rail. What a terrible shame. Governor Doyle had enlisted Talgo, the Spanish high speed rail operator and manufacturer, to build rail cars, passenger cars in Milwaukee on the side in an abandoned automobile plant and create 600 new jobs and build this high speed rail connection that would take people from Madison, Milwaukee to central Chicago, eventually to O'Hare airport – that would be the Chicago side of it and Mayor Daley had committed to doing that – and then the decision was still open on the connection to Minnesota whether LaCrosse or Eau Claire. Minnesota needed to have a state-wide rail plan in place that they didn't have until the very last minute until late in 2008 when then-commissioner Sorel took the initiative at my urging to put Minnesota in the game with the other states in the Midwest High Speed Rail Initiative, which is not a new idea. It was one that Rudy Perpich launched in 1988 and 89. It's now coming to fruition. Well notwithstanding the rejection by the current Governor of Wisconsin, that rail connection has to happen. It will happen. In time this will just be a momentary bump in the road. But in time we'll have that connection – O'Hare through Madison, Wisconsin, to the Minnesota border, up to the Twin Cities, connect Rochester, Twin Cities and Duluth and then we have a complete connection. And you have Union Station that has the light rail connecting to the heartland of Minnesota - St. Cloud connecting eventually up to Duluth and to Chicago. It's realistic. When I graduated from St. Thomas in 1956, I won a scholarship to the College of Europe in Bruges, Belgium, to study European economic integration, which was just at its beginning stage. I took the Milwaukee 400 from Minneapolis to Chicago, Milwaukee Road passenger rail – 400 miles in 400 minutes. The fastest train in America, it said. Time magazine had it on the cover in the 1930's as a train that could achieve speeds in excess of 100 miles an hour – fastest steam locomotives in the world. And then I arrived in France and traveled from Paris to Brussels – 6 ½ hours by train. Today, that trip is 45 minutes on the TGB. That distance – Paris to Brussels – is equal to New York/Washington or International Falls/Twin Cities. In 45 minutes? Or an hour and 15 minutes? There is no commercial air service between the capital of Europe, Brussels, and the capital of France, Paris. But every three minutes from 6 in the morning until midnight, a train is leaving in each direction with 1100 passengers on board at 186 to 200 miles per hour. You can live in Brussels, work at Unesco in Paris and be home for dinner that night. Now that is the future. That is what we need to develop in America. We have a number of obstacles – we have to run passenger cars and locomotives on freight rail lines, and freight has preemptive power in those corridors, but we're working those things out. The freight railroads are becoming much more cooperative and participatory and we're going to have a passenger rail future in America as we did in our past.

Q What was it that made light rail attractive enough for the FTA to fund?

A Let me express it in the views of them, FTA Administrator Jim Simpson, who when I asked him his assessment of the Central Corridor project said, it links the heart of two cities, it joins a University community to the greater Twin City metro area, it will

foster compact growth, it will enable student mobility, it will generate economic growth and development in a concentrated area, and it builds on an accepted and successful transit past in the two communities that linked both St. Paul and Minneapolis. And we think that this will be a successful project for the future.

Q Anything else you'd like to add?

A I think there's one additional element and that is the minority community that will benefit. There's the Somali community, there's a growing Hispanic community, there are other ethnic minority groups that will benefit immensely from the Central Corridor project. A precedent for that would be the south line extension of the Sacramento light rail project. It's 6.8 miles, but on its opening day it took 3200 cars off the street and gave opportunity for Hispanic, Chinese, Vietnamese, African American community members to have access to work and to the Sacramento core area that they did not have previously. It has continued to grow and to benefit the minority community in Sacramento just as I am confident it will do in the University center.