

Work for All the Crafts

Restoring the Union Depot in St. Paul



By Greg LeRoy
& Thomas Cafcas

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Cover photo credits: Worker photos courtesy of Labor Education Service, University of Minnesota; Transit Station Head House by Greg LeRoy

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Executive Summary

At a time of extremely high unemployment among Minnesota construction workers, the \$149 million St. Paul Union Depot rehabilitation project created more than 660,000 hours of building work. Thanks to the skilled labor of many different craftspeople and apprentices, the historic Depot is bustling again.

Reborn as a multi-modal transportation hub, “the Depot” (as it is popularly called) or “Union Depot” (as its owner now calls it) is helping trigger billions of dollars of private reinvestment in transit-oriented construction activity both within the Lowertown district of downtown St. Paul and along the Twin Cities’ new Green Line, the light rail line to downtown Minneapolis. More than 120 such projects are already under construction or slated.

The Union Depot restoration project created work for nearly all of the Building Trades crafts, including many that get few work-hours when transportation dollars are spent to build roads. Electricians, plumbers, bricklayers, sheet metal workers, roofers and painters got work, as did traditional road-building crafts such as carpenters, laborers and operating engineers. About 2,000 members of at least 13 Building Trades unions brought the St. Paul Union Depot back to life.

Especially in the restoration and modernization of the Depot’s visual centerpiece—its waiting room with historical friezes and a barrel vaulted ceiling and skylight—the job involved highly skilled craftsmanship from numerous trades.

The Union Depot project also created apprenticeship training opportunities for young workers, people of color and women in diverse construction skills. The project exceeded its diversity targets, with 18.9 percent of construction hours worked by minorities and 6.9 percent by women, and with 19.5 percent of contracting to Disadvantaged Business Enterprises. Minnesota’s labor-management training programs made the Depot a showcase for career-building opportunities, complete with video and high-school road show.

Locally and regionally, the Depot’s revival is stimulating more construction work that will create jobs for years for all of Minnesota’s Building Trades. In the surrounding Lowertown area of downtown St. Paul, private reinvestment is surging, including redevelopment of a large former U.S. Postal Service building.

Regionally, the Union Depot forms the eastern terminus of the Green Line (or Central Corridor), an 11-mile light rail service to downtown Minneapolis that is

opening in mid-June 2014. Even before trains start running, more than \$2.2 billion in additional construction activity has been permitted along the route—and more than a third of the slated projects have not yet announced their dollar values.

The Union Depot rehabilitation was funded in part by a federal grant of \$35 million from the Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery, or TIGER Discretionary Grant Program of the U.S. Department of Transportation. Construction of the Green Line itself and another station have also benefited from federal transportation grants.

The TIGER grant, combined with other federal, state and local funding sources to restore the Depot, is a powerful example of how strategic public investments in transit and transit-oriented development can stimulate terrific job creation for construction, one of the economy's hardest-hit industries. And the resulting infrastructure, encouraging dense and walkable redevelopment, will make the Twin Cities' economy more efficient, competitive and resilient.

Introduction: the Rebirth of a Midwestern Transportation Center

The rebirth of the St. Paul Union Depot, now “Union Depot” or “the Depot,” is both a symbol of and a trigger for the comeback of Lowertown, the historic riverfront district in Minnesota’s capital city.

Built between 1917 and 1923, it replaced a bustling 19th century depot that burned down. At its peak in the 1920s, the Depot served 282 trains per day, run by several railroads. Arriving immigrants, World War II soldiers, and millions of others passed through until the station was closed in 1971, when Amtrak was formed to consolidate railroads’ passenger service. Amtrak’s long-haul trains would stop at the Midway Station between the Twin Cities’ downtowns.

In 1974, Union Depot was added to the National Register of Historic Places. But it underwent many changes, as the United States Postal Service bought and altered much of the structure. In 2005, the Ramsey County Regional Railroad Authority (which owns the Depot) received funding to begin restoring it as a transportation hub.

The TIGER program was originally created as part of the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, or federal stimulus, and continues today as a competitive USDOT grant program. The St. Paul Union Depot TIGER grant of \$35 million was awarded

in February 2010 as part of the first round of TIGER awards. A total of \$243 million—including almost \$90 million in additional federal funds—would be used to acquire, reassemble and renovate the station (with \$149 million of that for construction work).

Metro Transit buses began arriving at the Depot in December 2012. Jefferson Regional Bus Lines with intercity service to 13 states (spanning Oklahoma to North Dakota to Wisconsin), moved into the Depot in January 2013. Amtrak finally arrived in May 2014. And the Green Line, with its 11 miles of light rail service to downtown Minneapolis, will commence operations on June 14, 2014. The Depot also features many amenities for bicyclists, pedestrians and even electric vehicle owners.

Restoring an Architectural Gem— Rapidly

Luckily, the Ramsey County Regional Railroad Authority had positioned Union Depot to be ready for work when the Recovery Act—with its call for “shovel-ready” projects—was enacted. But restoring a registered historical structure with a federally mandated review process and eight institutional stakeholders (state, county, city, preservation, economic development, freight railroads, Amtrak—even the owners of 36 condominiums that

had once been added to the head house) was a daunting challenge.¹ (The head house opens to the street and contains ticketing, offices, a restaurant and rest rooms. Passengers traverse it and the concourse to reach the waiting room above the tracks.)

For the Railroad Authority, Mortenson Construction served as the general building contractor; Mortenson in turn sub-contracted parts of the work to more than 110 other firms. HGA Architects and Engineers led the interior design, building restoration and new construction. URS engineered the transportation hub.

Divided into two groups, each with an engineering firm, one for the building (head house, concourse, and waiting room) and the other for the transportation structures (rail lines, train platforms, and parking structure), the teams met frequently to expedite decisions.

The job presented unusual challenges. With no surviving as-built architectural plans, the building had to be laser-scanned. The waiting room and concourse, abandoned since 1971, had water damage. New sconces and electrical service were needed, but masonry had to be removed and then restored to hide it. Fire sprinklers that had been installed in an exposed style were hidden.

A rare form of load-bearing tile that lined the ceiling of the concourse—known as Guastavino vaulting—was cleaned and restored. A new entranceway, staircase and elevator into the head house were added.

A foot of pigeon dung had collected between the waiting room skylight and the roof, and the skylight had been painted as a blackout precaution during World War II. When the skylight was finally uncovered, the space regained its warm sense of openness.

Decorative plaster work and historical tile friezes had to be cleaned of decades of cigarette smoke and train soot. Careful research established that the waiting room's ceiling was a warm golden yellow, evoking Minnesota wheat fields. Red details evoked the state's Iron Range.

As the work progressed, small areas were opened for public previews, and social media buzz began to generate excitement. For the many Minnesotans who could trace turning points in their family histories to the Depot—soldiers returning, students departing, lovers reunited—this cradle of memories was coming back to life.

Work for All the Crafts

Minnesota's Building Trades, like construction workers in almost every state, were hard-hit by the Great Recession. During the housing bubble, construction accounted for a disproportionate share of job creation between 2001 and 2007, and then it suffered an even greater share of job losses starting in late 2007. As work slowed down, many workers got so few hours that they failed to qualify for unemployment insurance when they became fully unemployed. As the slow recovery dragged on, many more exhausted even extended UI benefits.

So the announcement of the TIGER grant for Union Depot in early 2010, and a much larger USDOT New Starts grant, of \$474 million, to support the \$957 million construction of the Green Line connecting the St. Paul and Minneapolis downtowns, came as good news. "It was a blessing that it happened during a time when the construction industry saw unemployment at levels it hasn't seen since the Great Depression," Harry Melander, president of Building and Construction Trades Councils for both St. Paul and Minnesota, would later recount.²

An analysis of sub-contractor data from the Depot project reveals that about 2,000 members of at least 13 Building Trades unions benefited from the job. As the chart below details, of the 660,540 hours worked, the traditional road-building crafts—carpenters, laborers and operating

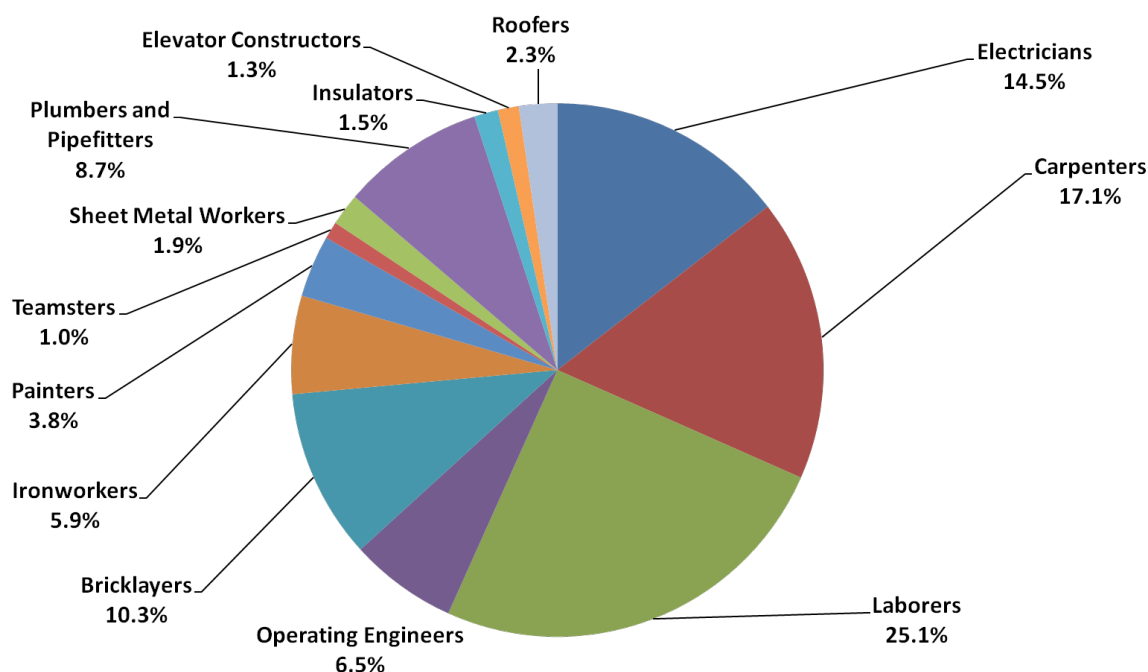
engineers—got almost half the work, *and* there was also substantial work for electricians, plumbers and pipefitters, bricklayers, ironworkers, painters and roofers. More specialized crafts such as sheet metal workers, elevator constructors, and insulators also got work.

The job required a great deal of skilled work to make the Depot modern and safe while respecting its architectural integrity. For example, plumbers had to install 69,775 linear feet of new piping and 57,000 linear feet of pipe designed to melt snow and prevent ice from building up. Electricians had to both re-wire the Depot and add amenities such as laptop charging stations, internet access, public address systems, and Americans with Disabilities Act-compliant signage. They also had to install more than seven miles of heat trace wiring to prevent pipes from freezing.

Operating engineers driving piles had to newly install or check more than 1,100 piles or micropiles supporting the train deck. In another ADA-compliance improvement, an elevator—complete with vintage iron work—was added to the head house from a new entry point.

The systems improvements, window restoration and replacements, insulation and other upgrades made the Depot far more energy-efficient. In May 2014, it was awarded a Gold certification by the U.S. Green Building Council's Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) standard.

Restoring the St. Paul Union Depot: Estimated Hours by Craft



Source: Good Jobs First analysis of Mortenson Construction sub-contractor data, survey of major sub-contractors.

The Union Depot work was such a welcome shot in the arm that Minnesota's labor-management training programs made the project a showcase for career-building opportunities. In cooperation with the University of Minnesota Labor Education Service, the apprenticeship programs even created a 12-minute video that was used in a road show to high school audiences. Through the stories of several apprentices, it emphasizes the diversity of work required by the job.³

Diversity in Construction Hiring

The St. Paul Union Depot project slightly exceeded its diversity hiring targets, which at the time were among the highest ever set for a public works project in the state. This success helped set the stage for increasingly aggressive construction-hiring targets in ensuing projects—part of a watershed series of events in the Twin Cities area that is starting to produce a construction workforce that more closely resembles the racial composition of the available labor force.

Construction Diversity at St. Paul Union Depot⁴

	Hours	% of Total
Native American Men	16,242	2.5%
Native American Women	2,769	0.4%
Asian/Pacific Islander Men	10,727	1.6%
Asian/Pacific Islander Women	400	0.1%
Black Men	45,060	6.9%
Black Women	5,567	0.8%
Hispanic Men	41,117	6.3%
Hispanic Women	2,765	0.4%
Total Minority	124,647	18.9%
White Men	499,380	75.9%
White Women	33,763	5.1%
Total Men	612,526	93.1%
Total Women	45,263	6.9%
Total Men and Women	657,789	100%

The Minnesota Department of Transportation, compiling payroll data, reports that through November 2013, minority workers put in almost 125,000 hours or 18.9 percent of the job (against a target of 18 percent), and that women put in more than 45,000 hours or 6.9 percent (against a target of 6 percent).⁵ The Railroad Authority also reported 19.5 percent of project contracting went to Disadvantaged Business Enterprises (against a target of 15 percent).⁶

Minnesota, like other states, has had a decades-long debate over how to solve racial disparities in construction employment. The issue reached a flashpoint during the Great Recession, when the newly formed Hire Minnesota coalition made racial diversity a key demand on projects, like the Depot, that received funding under the federal stimulus.

Just prior to the recession, a Minnesota Department of Transportation employee had refused to cover up a contractor's shortfall on hiring people of color, blown the whistle, was fired, and then won a wrongful-discharge lawsuit. Joanne Wagner alleged that MnDOT routinely ignored its own civil rights office in awarding contracts to companies that failed basic diversity standards in hiring and sub-contracting.⁷

The ensuing debate prompted more than 70 organizations to form Hire Minnesota and pressure MnDOT. Building on much better results achieved between 2008 and 2012, including in the Depot project, the Minnesota Department of Human Rights raised its minority hiring goal to 32 percent for projects in Ramsey and Hennepin Counties (home to St. Paul and Minneapolis, respectively), and 22 percent for projects in the rest of the metro area.⁸

Racial equity also figured into where the Green Line trains will stop. When

the original locations for the Central Corridor's station stops were announced, residents of three St. Paul neighborhoods protested, saying their overwhelmingly minority communities (especially African-American and Hmong) would be short changed. The "Stops for Us" campaign won the construction of three additional stations that will stimulate more development and better enable more residents in the three communities to access jobs.⁹

Twelve foundations formed the Central Corridor Funders Collaborative to support organizing around the Green Line and monitor its equity impact. As of early 2014, its Central Corridor Tracker finds only minor changes, such as some slight population growth and construction of more than 2,000 preserved affordable units of housing.¹⁰

Transit-Oriented Development Takes Off

The Union Depot's rehabilitation has helped trigger a surge of reinvestment in the Lowertown district of St. Paul, and the newly opening Green Line between the Twin Cities' downtowns (the Depot is its eastern terminus) has stimulated more than \$2.2 billion in additional construction—even before the light rail trains are running.¹¹

The Metropolitan Council, which released this news in May 2014 based on building permits, says 121 projects have been announced within a half-mile of the Green Line since engineering began in 2009—and more than a third of those have not yet announced their dollar-investment levels (nor does the total include the new Vikings stadium, TCF Bank Stadium, or Target Field). If the projects yet to be priced are similar in scale to those that have announced their costs, there would be more than \$3 billion in stimulated private construction work.

Given the location and complexity of these mostly private-sector construction projects, Minnesota's Building Trades members are likely to get a substantial share of the work, and far more than they would get if the development were occurring on the suburban fringe. For some workers, that will mean building on apprenticeship skills they acquired at the Depot.

Seventeen academic and health care employers with 67,000 jobs and 115,000 students along the Green Line are represented by the Central Corridor Anchor Partnership. With \$5 billion in slated capital projects, they seek "to create mutual benefits for both institutions and communities, with a focus on three key aspects: local hiring, local procurement and placemaking through real estate investments."¹²

In the surrounding Lowertown area of downtown St. Paul, private reinvestment is surging. Perhaps the most significant is the redevelopment of the 17-story former U.S. Postal Service building. Exeter Realty is spending \$50 million to convert space that used to employ 18,000 postal workers over three shifts into 200-250 apartments. The company already knows the market power of transit investments, having renovated and fully leased another apartment building along the Green Line. “Light rail was critical to getting lenders involved,” Exeter’s president told the St. Paul *Pioneer Press*.¹³

With so many civic actors—labor, community, civil rights, business, and philanthropy—rooting for their success and working to ensure that they benefit everyone in the Twin Cities, the Union Depot in St. Paul and the Green Line shine as economic development done right.

Conclusion

TIGER grants and other public investments that stimulate transit, intermodal connections, and transit-oriented development are powerful engines for diverse job creation and a more equitable recovery in the hard-hit construction sector. Work can be created directly for nearly all of the construction crafts—and historical racial disparities can be redressed—when landmarks like Union Depot are restored. And many times more private construction work can be stimulated when fixed-route transit service sends a strong signal to employers and investors, making dense, mixed-use redevelopment attractive.

Notes

- ¹ This narrative derives primarily from a May 28, 2014 interview with Michael Bjornberg of HGA Architects and Engineers, architectural project manager for the head house.
- ² Metropolitan Council press release May 14, 2014, “Metro Green Line Helps Attract at Least \$2.5 Billion in Development,” at [http://metro council.org/Transportation/Projects/Current-Projects/Central-Corridor/News-Display-Page/METRO-Green-Line-helps-attract-at-least-\\$2-5-billi.aspx](http://metro council.org/Transportation/Projects/Current-Projects/Central-Corridor/News-Display-Page/METRO-Green-Line-helps-attract-at-least-$2-5-billi.aspx).
- ³ Minnesota Building & Construction Trades Council, “Apprenticeship: Building Your Career” at: <http://www.minnesotabuildingtrades.org/news/apprenticeshipbuilding-your-career-video-available-youtube-or-dvd>.
- ⁴ Office of Chief Counsel, Minnesota Department of Transportation, Total Project Employment Hours report, aggregated Forms EEO-13 for Project Number 91-595-23, for the period 1/3/10 through 11/30/13.
- ⁵ Minnesota Department of Transportation, Office of Legal Counsel, Project 91-585-23, employment data for the period January 3, 2010 through November 30, 2013, provided April 11, 2014.
- ⁶ Targets here are from the Ramsey County Regional Railroad Authority’s “Project Highlights” brochure, n.d. but apparently issued in mid-2012 and referencing RCRRA’s website for the project <http://www.uniondepot.org/>.
- ⁷ Alliance for Metropolitan Stability, “Hiring Equity: Can MnDot End 20 Years of Failure to Meet Hiring Goals for People of Color?”, p. 3, at: http://www.metrostability.org/efiles/AMS_Report4_031913.pdf.
- ⁸ Ibid, p. 4.
- ⁹ Alliance for Metropolitan Stability, “STOPS FOR US! Organizing for Equity Along the Central Corridor,” at http://www.metrostability.org/efiles/stopsforus_final.pdf.
- ¹⁰ Central Corridor Funders Collaborative, “Central Corridor Tracker 2014 Report: Progress Beyond the Rail,” at: http://www.funderscollaborative.org/sites/default/files/CCFC_2014_Tracker-Web.pdf.
- ¹¹ Joe Kimball, *MinnPost.com*, “Met Council Says Central Corridor has attracted \$2.5 billion in new construction,” May 14, 2014 at: <http://www.minnpost.com/political-agenda/2014/05/met-council-says-central-corridor-has-attracted-25-billion-new-construction>.
- ¹² See more on the Anchor Partnership at: <http://www.corridorsofopportunity.org/activities/anchor-partnership>.
- ¹³ John Welbes, “St. Paul developer Jim Stoplestad puts post office building in cross hairs,” *St Paul Pioneer Press*, October 12, 2013 at: http://www.twincities.com/business/ci_24292066/st-paul-developer-jim-stoplestad-and-post-office