

A dizzying cycle: As drivers shift to transit, prospective fares rise

By STEVE BERG

Now that thousands of Twin Cities drivers are responding to high fuel prices by switching to buses and trains, Metro Transit is proposing the next logical step: raising fares because of — you guessed it — high fuel prices.

It's a dizzying cycle that leaves transportation thinkers chasing their tails and asking a nettlesome question: As commuters finally begin ditching their cars for a cheaper, cleaner and more efficient mode of travel, is this the right time to punish their good behavior? Is this really the right time for a fare increase?

The conventional answer is "yes."

Despite the revival of rail in the Twin Cities, 88 percent of transit riders still ride buses, and buses burn diesel fuel — lots of it. Metro Transit buses will consume 8 million gallons of biodiesel this year at rising costs that stagger the mind. The agency's fuel bill will run 65 percent higher this year over last.

But that's only part of the cash shortage problem. Thanks to a funding decision by the Legislature, about 40 percent of transit operations depend on sales-tax revenues from the sale of cars. With gas prices rising, people are buying fewer cars, and the cars they are buying are smaller and cheaper.

That adds up to falling revenues for transit operations.

The overall result isn't surprising. Even after a one-time transfusion of \$30 million that the Legislature included in last Febru-



MinnPost illustration

ary's big new transportation package, Metro Transit's operating budget will run \$15 million short this year, with larger deficits of \$42 million and \$30 million projected for 2009 and 2010.

The agency is clearly in a bind. It could cut service. But cutting service just as riders are demanding more of it makes no sense and flies in the face of the Met Council's goal of doubling bus ridership by 2030. Borrowing money for ongoing expenses is out of the question.

So, Metro Transit has settled on seeking a basic fare hike of 25 cents beginning in October — and as much as 50 cents more next year if fuel prices continue to climb. The agency's parent, the Metropolitan Council, will vote on the fare hike after a series of eight public hearings now under way.

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Did Colombia's hostage-rescue ruse jeopardize aid groups?

By DAN HAUGEN

In a remote clearing, deep in the Amazon jungle, armed rebel guards in green camouflage uniforms surrounded an idling white helicopter. A group of humanitarian aid workers in white shirts watched patiently as a crew bound 15 hostages with plastic handcuffs and boarded them onto the aircraft, which was to transport them to another rebel location.

Or so the rebels thought.

The International Humanitarian Mission, purportedly a friendly nongovernmental organization that loaned the helicopter for the mission, was actually the invention of Colombia's Defense Ministry. Military commandos took acting classes to practice their roles, which included various foreign accents, even one identical to Crocodile Dundee.

Once in the air, the soldiers turned the tables on the two rebels aboard the flight, and the hostages were flown to freedom. The news of their movie-script rescue last week spread a wave of relief and celebration around the globe among their friends, families and followers.

Potential ramifications of disguise

As clever as the mission was – and despite its happy ending – the Colombian military's choice of disguise raises the question of whether the rescue might make life more difficult, or perhaps even more dangerous, for legitimate humanitarian aid workers in the region.

"The answer is absolutely," said Michael Barnett, a professor who teaches classes on humanitarianism at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. "The moment military begin to impersonate aid workers, you run the risk of putting aid workers in jeopardy."

Aid organizations like Doctors Without Borders and the International Red Cross work to save lives in some of the most violent places on Earth. Much like journalists in combat zones, the safety and effectiveness of humanitarian workers frequently depend on all participants of a conflict viewing their

relief work as impartial, neutral and independent.

That reputation is damaged when humanitarian workers, or, as in this case, simply their image, become entangled with military operations or intelligence gathering. The blurring of lines that results can cast a potentially dangerous suspicion across all aid workers.

Since the rescue in Colombia, this issue has been raised on Internet sites, including an AidWorkers Network forum. "I imagine that the so-called 'humanitarian space' for genuine NGOs in Colombia has just shrunk a little bit further," wrote one blogger.

"My guess is this one incident will probably have some repercussions in Colombia, and diminishing repercussions on out around the world," said Chic Damback, president of the Washington-based Alliance for Peacebuilding, which seeks nonviolent solutions to world conflicts. Damback also served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia in the 1960s.

The hurdle of gaining trust

Winning the trust of local residents has always been a hurdle for humanitarian workers, particularly in Latin America, Damback said. Especially in that region, the Colombian military's choice of disguise for last week's mission is likely to feed into the common suspicion that aid workers are not always who they represent themselves to be.

"We were always accused of being things we weren't," Damback said of his time in the Peace Corps. "I stayed as far from the [U.S.] embassy as I possibly could because I did not want anybody in my village to have any reason whatsoever to believe that I might somehow be connected with our foreign policy or military or intelligence operations."

Doris Rubenstein, a former Peace Corps volunteer who now works as a nonprofit fundraiser in Minneapolis, has similar memories of serving in neighboring Ecuador in the early 1970s.

"I remember my first three weeks or so, people wouldn't even talk to

me," Rubenstein said. "They were giving me all this hard time. We don't want to talk to you because if we reveal anything you're going to tell it to the CIA."

"As time went by, we gained confidence, and then dear friends," she said.

After the Peace Corps, Rubenstein worked for the humanitarian aid organization CARE in Ecuador another decade before returning home to the United States. Based on her experiences then, she said she can't imagine the Colombia's use of mock aid workers having a serious impact on nongovernmental organizations working in the region.

"The reputation of aid workers amongst the people they work with is so high that this is going to be virtually irrelevant," she said.

The question, however, is whether the rebel combatants involved will begin to suspect legitimate aid workers of being military moles, Barnett said. The professor isn't an expert on Latin America, but he said, in general, experience suggests that combatants don't differentiate much among relief groups.

"Basically, aid agencies are all treated as foreigners. The presumption is that, like all foreigners, they're going to have their bias and they're probably aligned with the United States. And so aid workers have to spend a lot of time trying to earn the confidence of the local population. It's never quite won over," he said.

The blurring of military and humanitarian missions isn't a new phenomenon. As far back as the 1960s, military combatants would try to use International Red Cross ambulances as cover for battlefield maneuvers, Barnett said. More recently, the United States has been criticized for its strategy to "win the hearts and minds" in Iraq and Afghanistan. It involves dispatching local reconstruction teams, which include both military operatives to secure the city and civilian workers to distribute food and supplies.

"The inclusion of the military means they're not only trying to win over the hearts and minds, they're also gathering intelligence informa-

tion," Barnett said. "So they're not neutral. The consequence then is that when aid workers will come into a village after that, the combatants, the insurgents, the Taliban, will consider them to be part of the enemy, and therefore a viable target."

That's what happened in June 2004, when five aid workers traveling in a clearly marked Doctors Without Borders vehicle were ambushed and killed in northwestern Afghanistan. A Taliban spokesman claiming responsibility for the killings asserted that organizations like Doctors Without Borders work for American interests and are therefore targets.

Doctors Without Borders had been operating in Afghanistan for 24 years, since the Soviet invasion of the 1980s. After the killings it closed all of its medical programs in the country. It blamed the U.S.-led coalition for increasing the risk to aid workers in Afghanistan.

"[Doctors Without Borders] denounces the coalition's attempts to co-opt humanitarian aid and use it to 'win the hearts and minds.' By doing so, providing aid is no longer seen as an impartial and neutral act, endangering the lives of humanitarian volunteers and jeopardizing the aid to people in need," the organization said in a statement in 2004.

In Colombia, Doctors Without Borders maintained a field staff of about 270 people as of a year ago, according to its website. A spokesperson did not return phone calls Wednesday seeking comment on the hostage rescue. Spokespeople for the International Red Cross also did not return phone call and e-mail messages asking about the rescue's impact.

But it's not difficult to imagine how the rescue could affect their workers, Barnett said.

"I don't want to be melodramatic," Barnett said. "It doesn't necessarily mean that aid workers are going to get shot. But it does mean that you're going to have a lot more difficult time getting access to populations at risk."

Jagged Spiral's bone-chilling descent into 'Northern Rock'

MICHAEL METZGER

The opening track of Jagged Spiral's debut album, "Days From Evil," is reminiscent of Michael Jackson's landmark video for the title track of his "Thriller" album (the 25th anniversary of the release of the all-time bestselling disc was celebrated a few months ago).

The Minneapolis band's song is narrated by someone evoking the creepy cool of Vincent Price, the narrator of Jackson's video.

The tune is like the first scene of a horror movie. The opening credits roll as a phone rings, thunder and guitars crash, and a coy voice of doom describes in quasi-Victorian English the impending arrival of something very, very evil.

It's a slow, ominous grind by a group citing Black Sabbath, Tool, Iron Maiden, Nine Inch Nails, Type O Negative and similarly brooding masters of the metal arts as their influences.

On the band's elaborate website, its music is described as: "Angry. Progressive. Conceptual. Epic. Brazen. Dark. Metallic. Since no other genres suffice, [Jagged Spiral has] decided to declare a new genre of music: 'Northern Rock'. Rough as a serrated edge. Cold and slick as black ice. The harsh brutality of Gothic Hard Rock

merged with ambience, depth, and groove, then left out in the rain to corrode into something completely unique."

A description that awesome probably could only come from a band awesome enough to name its album "Days From Evil."

The band's three members eschew last names. Thirty-year-old Colin plays guitar, percussionist Josh is a fan of death metal ("influences range from southern Swedish death metal all the way to northern Swedish death metal"), and vocalist and bassist Zero has a philosophy degree from the University of Minnesota and calls himself a demonologist.

Jagged Spiral might obsess on the eternal void that is the darkness of night and all that, but it doesn't do so without humor. Check out this performance of "No, I Never Slept With Diablo Cody" on YouTube.

The band has been working on "Days From Evil" for three years. The end of those three years comes this Friday (July 11) at Club Underground, 355 Monroe St. NE, Minneapolis.

S.B.I, Sick Machine and Something to Fear are also on the bill.

Travis and Johnny

At another, though not necessarily opposite, end of the musical spectrum is Travis

and Jonny. Despite the name, Travis and Jonny is a five-piece St. Paul band consisting of Jon Kraft on guitar, vocals and harmonica; Travis Bolton on guitar and vocals; Kristen Kraft on piano and vocals; Abram Heyn on bass, and drummer Paul Nevins.

Their end of the spectrum is where The Weavers, a young Bob Dylan, the Washington Squares, Woody Guthrie and Billy Bragg exist in various stages of their careers. It's loose, upbeat folk music, with sunlight falling on the listener much more often than tear-drops.

Travis and Jonny releases its self-titled album at 8 p.m. this Friday (July 11) at the 400 Bar, 400 Cedar Ave. S., Minneapolis.

White Iron Band

Ely, Minn., lies about 90 miles northeast of Duluth. Ely's civic motto claims that the town is "the last great pure experience."

White Iron Band, originally from Ely, isn't a "pure experience," however. The jam band's honky-tonk is a hot melt of blues, rock and country — perfect for a big time at the watering hole.

It's music to knock back a couple of shots of Jack to. It's music for simultaneously stompin' on the pedal while bitchin' about the price of gas. It's a high-five, fist-pump and

foot-stomp.

Speaking of which, here's White Iron lead singer Matt Pudas talking a bit about his band (Mark Grundhoefer of Down Low is also in the video).

The band released its fourth album, "Devil's Sweet Revenge," back in April, but is again celebrating its release this Friday at the Cabooze, 917 Cedar Ave. S., in Minneapolis. It's very possible that White Iron will also be re-celebrating the Fourth of July at the show, but who knows for sure.

Admission to the show is \$7.

Upcoming pick

He wears a three-piece suit and acts as if he's destined to die in 1929 of a broken heart. Lonesome Dan Kase plucks out blues of bygone days and heroes. When you hear him picking his percussive style of country blues, you'll also hear Blind Lemon Jefferson, Blind Boy Fuller and Sleepy John Estes rise up from their graves and point to the rural origins of blues.

Lonesome Dan will be at the St. Paul Farmer's Market, 290 E. Fifth St., this Saturday (July 12) at 9 a.m. Admission is free.

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Joel Kramer, CEO and editor

A dizzying cycle: As drivers shift to transit, prospective fares rise

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There's also an unconventional answer to the fare hike question. It's "no." Raising fares, say critics, would push some riders back into their cars and slow down transit's impressive growth rate just when more riders and more buses and trains are most needed. They ask: What kind of lunatic policy is that?

On Wednesday, Minneapolis Mayor R.T. Rybak spoke out against the fare-hike proposal during a public hearing at City Hall.

'Historic opportunity'

"At a time of skyrocketing gas prices, traffic congestion and global warming, we have an historic opportunity to dramatically improve and increase transit use," he said. "At this rare moment we have the opportunity to make the single greatest shift in transportation patterns in a generation. We should seize this opportunity, not ignore it. ...

"Fare increases discourage transit ridership, pure and simple, and Metro Transit should delay this increase and explore other options to balance their budget."

Among the options: Metro Transit has a rainy-day fund of \$19 million. Perhaps the agency could dip into that fund to shore up the deficit until the Legislature can find a stronger financial footing for transit operations.

"This is a temporary problem that doesn't have to be solved on

the backs of the riders," said Jim Erkel, transportation director for the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy. When gasoline costs soared, drivers were not asked to pay gas taxes that were 40 cents higher to cover the entire cost.

Erkel advocates a legislative fix and a temporary dip into the rainy-day fund.

"If this isn't a rainy day, I don't know what is," David Greene of the religious organization ISALAH said in testimony at a public hearing Tuesday night in Hopkins.

Cheaper to drive?

Another rider, Luke Francel of Minneapolis, said the pending fare increases would make it cheaper for him to drive to his job in Hopkins. "This isn't going to help people to get off the roads," he said.

Indeed, higher fares will tighten the grip of what Jeff Hazen of Bloomington called "our transportation monoculture." The thing to do, he said, is not raise fares but expand alternatives to the auto.

That was the tone of the Hopkins meeting — that and the point made by some heart-wrenching testimony that the disabled and poor will be hit hardest by higher fares.

There's the counterpoint, of course. It's that everyone has to share the pain of higher fuel prices, including transit riders. That's pretty much what Arlene McCarthy, the Met Council's

chief transportation planner, told me before the meeting began.

Metro Transit spending more for the same ride

"Everyone is affected by high fuel prices, and the bottom line is that it's costing us more to deliver the same ride," she said. Fares, which normally cover about one-third of operating costs, have now dipped down toward one-quarter. Her point is that riders have to pull a bigger load.

How big? Surely, I said, they won't be expected to cover the huge operating deficits projected for the out-years.

She agreed that some of the operations problem is structural and must be left for the Legislature to fix.

With the aid of hindsight, it does seem foolish for the Legislature to have made transit operations dependent on auto sales. In an energy crisis, one would expect auto sales to decline as transit demand rises. It was a funding crunch waiting to happen. It's especially ironic that transit would be battered by the decline of the SUV.

Ideas include tax for off-street parking

"There a lot of irony to all of this," said Barb Thoman of the lobbying group Transit for Livable Communities. The organization has suggested on its web site a number of alternatives to the fare increase, including a new tax on off-street parking.

"Free" parking is one of those hidden subsidies that makes driving seem cheaper than it actually is.

There are many such hidden subsidies that encourage driving. It's not well known, for example, that one-third of local property-tax revenues go toward building and maintaining roads.

Indeed, the economy embeds a massive support system for cars. The costs of insurance, a highway patrol, hospital trauma units and a foreign policy that dictates the fighting of wars in oil-rich lands are generally not counted as a cost of auto dependence. Providing a more balanced transportation structure, one that gives similar advantage to transit and other modes, is a huge policy challenge.

The question here and now is this: Does it make sense to raise fares and discourage ridership when political leaders on both sides of the aisle say government policy should be to encourage alternatives to excessive driving and gasoline consumption, to mitigate climate change and to lessen our dependence on unstable foreign energy supplies?

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Want to add your voice?

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THE DAILY GLEAN

Minneapolis, St. Paul: now the cool kids on metro block

By DAVID BRAUER

For most of this decade, Minneapolis and St. Paul have insisted they're growing even if the Census Bureau hasn't concurred. Now everyone agrees, writes the Strib's David Peterson. All three population clusters — central cities, inner-ring 'burbs, and outer-ring 'burbs — grew last year, but exurban growth slowed as the others surged. It seems too soon to credit gas prices, and a methodology change for counting college students may help the core. Minneapolis population is still down from 2,000.

I'm searching for some new news glimmers in the wake of Jesse Ventura's non-announcement Wednesday, and honestly can't find any. The Uptake's Noah Kunin offers a great (and visual!) analysis of how the "hair-trigger" media overreacted to Jesse's NPR gamesmanship Wednesday. Kudos to the PiPress for appropriately burying the non-news deep in the B section.

It'll now cost \$30 to check that bag for a round-trip Northwest flight, everyone reports. For good measure, the airline will lay off 2,500 workers, about 8 percent of its workforce. Frequent-flier tix now cost \$25 to \$100. The PiPress's John Welbes says the moves raise \$300 million a year; fuel costs were up \$410 million in the first quarter from a year earlier. MPR's Martin Moylan notes that voluntary cuts come

first. The Strib's Liz Fedor writes that pilots have furlough protection.

Fox9's Jeff Baillon probes a \$30 million state computer expense that produced no usable system. The technology was supposed to monitor MinnCare eligibility and make it easier for folks to participate. The legislative auditor says the Department of Human Services was not forthcoming about monitoring and terminating a contractor. A DHS spokesperson won't talk to Fox on-camera. The contractor blames state change orders. The state doesn't have a date or cost for a replacement.

WCCO's Pat Kessler calls an anti-Al Franken ad a "distortion" that "misrepresents legislation that makes it easier for workers to organize unions." Contrary to the ad's claim, "the bill does not eliminate the secret ballot election," though it reduces management's right to insist on such a ballot, Kessler says. Unions could get recognition when most workers sign non-secret card checks. The ad was produced by business groups. Note: Many WCCO workers, including reporters, are union members.

Nick Coleman dings Norm Coleman for playing footsie with the Big Lie of Chinese oil drilling. Sez Norm: "The Chinese are able to begin operating 90 miles from our shore by working for Cubans." (This is a story the paper's non-columnists still haven't covered.)

Norm's spinner explains China is "in a better position to drill off our coast than we are," but Nick notes no foreign country drills off Cuba, the Chinese aren't even searching, and we do pump off our coasts.

If you're someone who hates the new FISA bill, Minnesota Independent's Steve Perry argues you should temper your praise for "no" voter Amy Klobuchar. The key Senate vote came two weeks ago, when there was a chance to filibuster the bill, Perry says; Klobuchar voted to keep it alive. After that, Wednesday's approval was a foregone conclusion. Klobuchar's spokesperson says the two-week-old vote didn't block a filibuster, but a local expert disputes that.

A federal judge called St. Paul's RNC protest time restrictions "a bit tight," writes the PiPress' Jason Hoppin. The city has limited first-day protests from noon to 2 p.m. MPR's Elizabeth Stawicki says marchers want a 2 to 7 p.m. window; the Strib's Randy Furst adds that the city offered a 3 p.m. end, plus a wider route. The city says opponents can jeer from a public viewing area until 11 p.m., but marching muddles transportation plans.

The PiPress' Dave Orrick says St. Paul decided to limit "sober houses" — groups of recovering adults — to one per block. The regs only affect new sober homes. Arguing that residents are a protected class,

sober-house backers plan to sue. The Strib's Chris Havens adds that new homes in certain areas can have no more than seven residents, with 1.5 parking spaces per resident.

Strib ace Chris Serres discerns that Wilsons the Leather Experts' assets are being bought by a close pal of Lyle Berman, "who has flipped Wilsons more times than a Vegas poker chip." However, the story's kicker notes Berman is "out of the picture." The new owners, G-III, bought the Wilson's name, outlet stores and website and will run their business out of Wilson's headquarters. They boast of saving 1,000 jobs.

The PiPress' Rubén Rosario offers a nifty advancer on the U.S. Border Patrol's "first-in-Minnesota" recruiting fair. It's a growth industry in a slow economy; the Patrol offers \$70K after three years, and perhaps 100 recruits will attend. Rosario has some fun with the amped-up recruiting pitch: "We're looking for people with all their senses in overdrive." TV folks, go to the fair and feed my senses with sales pitches about tracking people in the desert.

Nort spews: Rough day for the local clubs. Twins stunk out Fenway with an 18-7 shellacking by Boston; they're now 3.5 games behind Chicago. And the Lynx are back to Stynx after a 73-67 home loss to the terrible Atlanta Dream.

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COMMUNITY VOICES

Sustainable agriculture: It's time has come

By JOE RADOSEVICH

What if our food system supported sustainable agriculture, local family farmers and rural communities? For more and more Minnesotans, "What if?" is becoming "Why not?"

In just the past few years, Minnesota has seen a budding interest in fresh, locally grown, sustainable agriculture. If we cultivate this movement right, the long-term possibilities could dramatically alter our food system to the benefit of farmers, rural communities, and all of our health.

From sold out shares at Community Supported Agriculture farms to the bevy of restaurants that feature Minnesota food, it seems that local, sustainable farms are resurgent. Even mainstream grocers like Cub Foods and Lund's are featuring more locally grown foods. What's going on?

"A lot," says Linda Harding, a chef who also works with the Southeast Minnesota Food Network, a group of about 90 farms that sell to co-ops, restaurants, and institutions like St. Olaf College.

"Restaurants, more and more, want to have local products raised sustainably..." said Harding. As many as 50 restaurants purchase from the food network each week during the summer, and a core group of 15-20 stay through the winter. But "the public," says Harding, "is also much more aware."

More inquiries about lamb and beef

That's something that Connie Karstens, a farmer from Hutchinson, Minn., has noticed too. "We've been trying to sell locally for many years," says Karstens, and "I'm finding more inquiries about our lamb and beef, consumers, folks are calling up and asking about it." The Karstens have run their farm for 18 years, and while rising fuel costs have made it harder to compete, Connie has noticed that, "people are more

educated and want to buy locally."

While it is hard to quantify, the growing interest in sustainable agriculture isn't just anecdotal. Community Supported Agriculture Farms, or CSAs, are a concrete example. CSA farms sell shares, which account for the cost of the farm, and in return, consumers get a fresh box of locally grown produce.

Glen Hill is the executive director of the Minnesota Food Association, and it has operated a CSA, called Big River Farms, for the past four years in Marine on St. Croix.

"There's definitely an increase in demand," said Hill. "On May 15th, we sold out (of shares) ... and we increased by 100 the number of shares offered from last year." Their first year they offered 50 shares, now they're up to 380.

A single share lasts nearly 5 months, and includes enough vegetables and fruits to feed a family of four. Many CSAs drop off boxes at co-ops and coffee stores in the metro area. Big River Farms' story isn't unique; of the 32 CSAs in the Twin Cities Metro area, 26 sold out before mid-June this year. Across the state, the number of CSA farms has nearly doubled in the past four years, from 36 in 2004 to 61 today.

Much local produce goes to big grocers

Individuals and restaurants aren't alone in their interest in locally grown sustainable food. Big River Farms sells nearly 30 percent of its vegetables wholesale. Grocers like Lund's & Byerly's, Cub Foods, and Kowalski's are all customers. Recently they've even begun selling to Chipotle restaurants in Minnesota; about a third of Chipotle's green peppers now come from Marine on St. Croix, rather than hundreds of miles away.

There are many different reasons for the increased interest in buying locally grown, sustainable food. Glen Hill thinks that

determined, long term "efforts by communities and non-profits to promote local food" have begun to pay off. "Regular and persistent issues with our food system" have also been a factor. He cited recent food scares, from this month's salmonella outbreak in tomatoes to the 2006 E. coli outbreak in spinach due to factory farm practices.

Harding sees a new movement to connect the public with local food. "Farmers markets," like the new Mill City Market in downtown Minneapolis, have made "more people aware of who's growing their food," said Harding. She also singled out chefs as early "champions of this movement," who, by showcasing fresh locally grown fruits, vegetables, and meats, have brought forward all their benefits.

Buying local

Buying locally grown foods supports the local economy and is better for the environment. Minnesota 2020's report last December, "Made in MN: The Value of Buying Local," found that for every dollar spent locally, 68 cents stayed here – versus 43 cents for every dollar spent at a national chain or store. Of every dollar spent on food in the United States, only 19 cents goes to the farmer; the rest, according to the Land Stewardship Project, goes to "packaging, transportation, processing, wholesaling, and food preparation." Buying locally means more money goes back to farmers, their local distributors, and vendors.

In addition, local food uses less energy and produces less pollution; it doesn't have to be packaged and transported across the globe. It's a fact that Glen Hill finds particularly ridiculous. "Why are we importing onions? Why are we importing potatoes!" he exclaimed, "My goodness!" Instead of supporting local growers, the average plate of food now travels 1,300 miles from farm to

table, that's how far it is from here to Vegas.

Local foods are usually sold within 24 hours of being harvested. According to the Land Stewardship Project, such fresh foods, "contain more of the nutrients that come with ripening — nutrients that our bodies need to be healthy." Local farmers, they add "can offer fruits and vegetables bred for taste and freshness rather than shipping and shelf life." Simply put, they taste better.

Sustainable practices

Sustainable agriculture is better for the environment and our health. It means cleaner air and water, few to no pesticides or hormones, and the protection of the natural local ecosystem. Sustainable practices work to maintain habitats for animals and to strengthen the long-term health of the land, and the food grown on it. No factory farms pumping animals with hormones, rivers with pollution, and produce with pesticides.

"People are really beginning to understand why local food is important" reflected Connie Karstens.

For many reasons, from supporting family farmers to rural economies, from the environment to simply better tasting food, consider joining thousands of fellow Minnesotans who've recently embraced locally grown, sustainable foods. Buy local foods at farmers markets and co-ops, encourage cafeterias and restaurants to use local growers, and share the benefits with friends. With enough effort, we can turn this growing awareness into the beginnings of a new food system that supports farmers, local economies, the environment and our health.

Joe Radosevich is a 2008 George Washington University Shapiro Public Service Fellow at Minnesota 2020, a nonpartisan think tank based in St. Paul. This article originally appeared on Minnesota 2020's website.