

The next big stem cell fight: mixing cow and human DNA

By SHARON SCHMICKLE

CAMBRIDGE, ENGLAND—In Gary Larson's wacky Far Side world, cows and humans swap traits with hilarious results.

Nobody is laughing, though, over a real-world bid to mix cow and human DNA, something scientists here say they must do in order to advance stem cell studies.

Debate over this step in the exploration of stem cells already has reverberated across the Atlantic. Sen. Norm Coleman, R-Minn., is a co-sponsor of a bill that would ban the research in the United States.

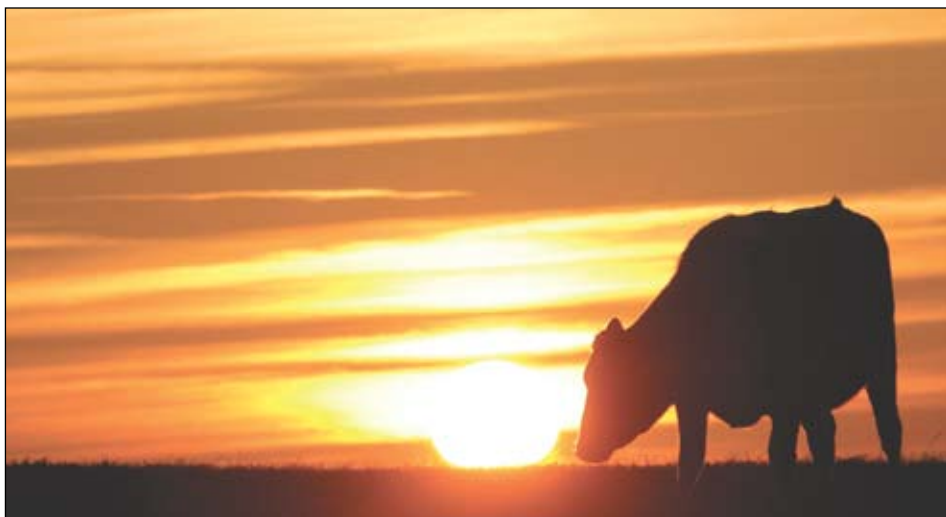
From the first test-tube baby to the first cloned animal, scientists in this part of the world have led a biological revolution that set off an uproar in the United States but met relative calm here.

Now, though, the research is crossing a line that has shattered the calm and ignited fiery debate all the way up to Prime Minister Gordon Brown's cabinet.

The line at issue is the notion that the human animal is fundamentally different from all other creatures on Earth — in a sacred sense for many people of many faiths.

"From a Christian viewpoint, the teaching is, of course, that we are made in the image of God, and there is something special about human life in relation to divinity," said Sir Brian Heap, a prominent Cambridge University biologist who has helped his government shape stem cell policy.

Heap is one of many scientists, though, who are ready to cross the line for the sake of research that could save lives and solve the mysteries behind deadly diseases.



By DARREN STAPLES, Reteurs

At the center of the latest stem cell debate: A cow grazes at sunset in central England.

Blurring human-animal lines

It isn't religion alone that triggers revulsion to the notion of stirring animal DNA in with human genes, said Jeffrey Kahn, who directs the Center for Bioethics at the University of Minnesota.

Throughout the centuries, humans have drawn a bright line around themselves, relegating other animals to a lower order. We used animals to pull our plows, test our medicines and fill our dinner plates — and, with notable exceptions, we slept at peace with our moral sensibilities.

Now, though, scientists are blurring that

line. Genomic studies are revealing that chimpanzees and humans are separated, at most, by 5 percent of their DNA. The cow is a more distant genetic cousin, but it too shares genes with humans.

Beyond the genome, scientists are finding that some animals possess intellectual and emotional capacity far greater than previously believed. They create tools, feel pain, recognize a sense of themselves as individuals, use language and experience some emotions.

continues on page 4

INSIDE

MINNPOST.WORLD

Just 12 days ago, Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica remembered another July 11 — the day, in 1995, when 8,372 men and boys were massacred there. On Monday, Serbian authorities arrested Radovan Karadzic, the man charged with masterminding the killings.

page 2

BRIAN VOERDING

Political activism leads to self-discovery — and teaching.

page 3

DAVID BRAUER

The Daily Glean: Minneapolis: now 27 percent safer!

page 5

COMMUNITY VOICES

Sen. John Marty: Cut transit fares to 25 cents.

page 6

MINNPOST.WORLD

At last, the capture of Europe's 'most wanted'

By SUSAN ALBRIGHT

Less than two weeks ago, on July 11, 2008, Bosnian Muslims in Srebrenica mourned both the long buried and their still-lost loved ones as they remembered another July 11 – the horrible day in 1995 when the international community, in the form of the United Nations, utterly failed them. On that day, 8,372 men and boys – supposedly under the protection of the U.N. – were separated from their families and massacred. For 13 years the international community again failed them – this time by failing to find and prosecute those who'd been charged by the United Nations War Crimes Tribunal with ordering the killings.

On July 12, Times Online wrote in its editorial: "The men who ordered the killings, Ratko Mladic and Radovan Karadzic, remain at large. For 13 years they have been protected not by vast deserts or impenetrable mountains, but by people who refuse to accept the overwhelming evidence that they are war criminals.

"Guilt for war crimes does not expire. ...The men responsible for Srebrenica can run, but they cannot hide forever. Their surrender would unblock Serbia's vital EU accession talks. More importantly, it would bring, at last, some moral restitution for their victims."

Yesterday, Serbian authorities arrested Radovan Karadzic, the alleged mastermind of the genocide.

'True architect of mass murder'

"Richard Holbrooke, the former US assistant secretary of state who negotiated the 1995 Dayton accords that ended the war in Bosnia, described Karadzic as 'a real true architect of mass murder' and hailed the news of his arrest as 'a tremendous step forward for Serbia's desire to join the West,' reported David Charter of Times Online.

"He said: 'This is the most wanted man in Europe, the Osama bin Laden of Europe. He has evaded capture for almost 13 years. He was the primary intellectual architect of the ethnic cleansing.'"

National Public Radio, meanwhile, quoted former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, who termed the arrest "extremely significant."

"He really is the person who was behind the systematic ethnic cleansing – murder – of several hundred thousand Bosnians," she told NPR. "It does show that justice will prevail."

Genocide, war crimes, other atrocities ...

Karadzic faces genocide charges not only for his role in the massacre, Europe's worst atrocity since World War II, Charter explained, but also "for organising the siege of Sarajevo, which claimed 12,000 lives. He was understood to have been brought before a hastily convened court in Belgrade last night after he was seized by Serb forces inside the country, according to Boris Tadic, the president. ...

"Under the indictment, last amended in May 2000, the UN war crimes tribunal charged Karadzic with 15 counts of genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and other atrocities committed between 1992 to 1996."

Why, after 13 years of protection, did Serbian authorities successfully take him in?

The answer lies in a Serbian election earlier this year – and in its victors' drive to join the European Union. On May 11 Times Online reported that "Pro-EU reformers were hailed last night as the surprise victors of Serbia's snap general election, which was seen as a referendum on whether the Balkan country's future lay towards the West or back with its traditional ally Russia."

That set the stage. The EU set the conditions for eventual membership.

'A milestone in cooperation with criminal tribunal'

According to the BBC, "The arrest of Mr Karadzic and other indicted war criminals is one of the main conditions of Serbian progress towards European Union membership. The EU Enforcement Commissioner Olli Rehn welcomed the news.

"This is certainly a milestone in Serbia's cooperation with the international criminal tribunal on the former Yugoslavia. It proves the determination of the new government to achieve full cooperation with the tribunal," Mr. Rehn said.

"The news will delight EU foreign ministers meeting today in Brussels, who already had Serbian accession on the agenda and have piled enormous pressure on Belgrade to find the final war crimes fugitives," Times Online reported.

"Pre-accession talks have started, designed to encourage the reformist government. ... A statement from the EU presidency, currently held by France, said the arrest was 'an important step on the path to the rapprochement of Serbia with the European Union.'"

Significant as Belgrade's new tilt to the West is, the moral dimension of its leaders' action on Monday deserves the last word. In a fascinating piece assessing both Karadzic and the significance of his capture, Aleksandar Heman – a Bosnian fiction writer living in the United States – wrote for Balkan Insight.com:

"He fully existed only when organising the genocide, he was invisible and irrelevant before it, and has been invisible ever since. Karadzic's star shone only against the dark skies of a vast crime. This is why Karadzic is still popular among the Serbs in the Republika Srpska and Serbia proper: like a mythological being, he came out of nowhere to do what needed to be done – wipe out the 'Turks' and create an eternal, heavenly kingdom, completing the mythological job

started hundreds of years ago in the Battle of Kosovo. He did not care what the world might say – for the world is but a minor distraction in the eternal Serbian struggle to survive and live as the celestial people; he was ever willing to sacrifice even his moral well being for the people. ...

"Karadzic's aura was enhanced by his withdrawal into the woodsy, mountainous background after he abandoned all his political positions in 1996. Like a hajduk, the mythological Serbian outlaw, he is a lone wolf preserving Serbdom from perishing, surviving in the face of a great enemy – the "Turks" and the world itself – willing to come again out of his heroic obscurity if necessary.

"Karadzic in the The Hague is a remedy to the Serbian nationalist mythology – Scheveningen is not a mythological space, but a prison. There, Karadzic would be in the limelight that would dispel the darkness of the nationalist mythology. He would be at the centre of a legal process, a trial based on documents and testimonies, which would demythologize his actions, and dismantle his criminal universe.

"The man who thought he was bigger than the world, who believed he was entitled to dispensing divine retributions on behalf of his people, needs to be humbled by the human court of the world. It is time the myth of Karadzic was replaced by the truth of his crimes."

Susan Albright, a MinnPost managing editor, writes about national and foreign developments. She can be reached at salbright@minnpost.com.

Political activism leads to self-discovery – and teaching



BRIAN VOERDING

As a high-school student in Shoreview, Mitra Jalali wasn't much of an activist. She had potential, she figured, but struggled to step up in such a structured environment.

And when she went off to college at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, she spent her time running a community organization that precluded her from getting politically involved. Then came a chance meeting with Campus Progress in the spring of her junior year.

What a difference a year makes.

That spring, Jalali organized a film screening related to the Iraq war, and over the next year, she organized a large anti-war protest at the state Capitol, founded a Campus Progress chapter at her school, wrote opinion pieces for the student newspaper, and worked tirelessly to bring together several

like-minded but disparate activist groups on campus.

Of course, she put in hundreds and hundreds of hours behind the scenes to make all that happen — though, as she put it, “that’s not the glamorous part.”

Resuscitating school’s involvement

Her work, she said, was largely because she felt her school had a storied activist past but not much current involvement.

“It was really just about becoming involved in things and making them real,” she said. “A lot of people don’t have actions that match their beliefs.”

Shortly after graduating this year, Jalali was named the Campus Progress Student Representative of the Year, a national, fairly competitive honor that’s only given to a pair of students each year.

For some quick background, Campus Progress is the student-

aimed arm of the Center for American Progress, a Washington, D.C.-based progressive think tank. It provides activist college students with resources ranging from policy papers to how-to guides on organizing events.

Jalali also trained younger students before she graduated (like Harry Waisbren in the photo above, who assumed Jalali’s duties as the leader of the school’s Campus Progress chapter) to ensure the activist spirit she had helped return to UW-Madison would remain for good.

Discovery during the process

But a funny thing happened to Jalali as she progressed through her senior year, a self-discovery she valued many times more than any of her organizing successes.

“I started out really liberal,” she said. “That gave me energy to launch into full-scale activist mode. But as I started attack-

ing these problems, whether through media or advocacy or community service or campaigning, I began to realize it’s not that simple. There are many, many things to consider with every issue.

“I still consider myself an activist, but if anything, I’ve shifted more to the right. ... I see so many more things now than I did then.”

In other words, her activism taught her to see the world’s shades of gray just beyond the blacks and whites.

Now Jalali is in the Teach for America program, and will head to New Orleans soon to teach middle-school and alternative-school students. She wanted to tackle something that felt more immediate.

“I still believe in issues, and still have ambitions, but the way I go about doing it is different,” she said.

“It was really just about becoming involved in things and making them real.

A lot of people don’t have actions that match their beliefs.”

– Mitra Jalali

Want to add your voice?

If you’re interested in joining the discussion by writing a Community Voices article, email Susan Albright at salbright@minnpost.com.

MinnPost inPrint

MinnPost in Print includes highlights of MinnPost.com, a new daily providing high-quality journalism for people everywhere who care about Minnesota. MinnPost in Print is distributed at selected locations in the Twin

Cities, but anyone can print a copy from a PDF available at www.minnpost.com. Visit the website for audio, videos and more stories. We believe that high-quality journalism is not just a consumer good; it’s a community asset

that contributes to the health of our democracy and the quality of our lives. Please consider making a donation to MinnPost, a nonprofit enterprise.

Joel Kramer, CEO and editor

The next big stem cell fight: mixing cow and human DNA

continued from page 1

The upshot, Kahn said, is a fresh encounter with the fundamental question that has roiled American politics throughout the abortion debate: What defines personhood?

That question in the United Kingdom right now turns on the eggs nurturing human cells that form embryos.

To understand the debate, let's begin at the beginning.

The magical 'master cell'

The research that led to this explosive step began in Cambridge, inside the brick and stone walls of a stately Victorian building. In 1981, genetic scientists, experimenting with mice, discovered a seemingly magical "master cell" that could give rise to all of a body's parts from a beating heart to a perceptive eye.

The cell was an embryonic stem cell. It wasn't until the late 1990s that scientists in Wisconsin isolated the same cells in human embryos, and set off a race for cures that have the potential to revolutionize medicine.

One major thrust is unlocking the mysteries of deadly diseases. Scientists envision a day when a line of stem cells — from, say, a cancer patient — could reveal clues to what went wrong and lead the way to cures.

Another promising potential is growing replacements for damaged or diseased tissue — ideally from a patient's own cells so that rejection would not be a problem. A burn patient, for example, could grow new skin for grafting.

Egg shortage

There is a practical hurdle, though. The hope for replacing diseased tissue and eventually whole organs rests on a process that requires eggs.

Researchers have relied on small supplies of eggs donated from fertility clinics. But now the studies are at a point where scientists need a much larger array of stem cell lines, Heap said, "to understand the basic mechanisms that are involved in producing let's say a liver cell as opposed to a nerve

cell as opposed to a skin cell."

Women can't be expected to donate enough eggs to satisfy that need.

Any woman who has undergone infertility treatment knows it is not a simple matter to deliver the eggs needed to expand one family let alone stock a major research facility. Egg donation can require many clinic visits and minor surgery to extract eggs from the ovaries.

Harvard University recently spent tens of thousands of dollars on newspaper ads in an unsuccessful campaign to recruit egg donors for stem cell studies, the Boston Globe reported.

"Hundreds of women have responded to the ads, but none has followed through with donations for a variety of reasons," the Globe reported.

What's true at Harvard is true in the UK and around the world. With inadequate egg supplies, the studies are lagging.

The controversial alternative is cow eggs.

The genetic swap

The process starts with cow eggs, so small that a pile of 50 looks to the naked eye like a tiny dust ball. From each egg, lab workers extract the nucleus, the DNA payload that would have developed into a calf had a bull's sperm penetrated the egg. In its place, they insert the DNA package from a human cell.

Next, workers use laboratory techniques to trick the egg into thinking that it has been fertilized by sperm. Within about a week, the single-celled egg has morphed into a ball of cells that make up an early embryo from which stem cell lines can be extracted.

Here's the hitch: Even after the cleanest genetic swap, the egg retains a trace of DNA which resides outside its nucleus. While most of our DNA is inherited from both parents, this mitochondrial DNA comes from the mother alone. And she passes it to her offspring.

Thus, the human embryo gets fragments of bovine DNA. And, thus the uproar.

The process is not new, nor is the marriage of human and animal DNA. Several labs in the Up-

per Midwest have inserted human genes into cow eggs in efforts to induce the cows to yield milk laced with ingredients for human medicine.

The University of Minnesota and the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., have experimented for years with developing cells and organs in pigs for transplantation into humans.

In 1998, researchers in Massachusetts announced that they had fused human DNA into cow eggs, creating very early embryos that critics called "cowboys." None of the embryos survived, and the aim was not to give birth to cow-human hybrids. Instead the scientists sought tissue for transplantation.

In 2005, the National Academies in Washington, D.C., issued guidelines, which are not legally binding, saying such experiments should be allowed if they are approved by special review boards.

Meanwhile, some other countries, including Canada, banned human-animal embryo research.

Now, in reaction to the British experiments, some Congress members are pushing for a U.S. ban.

"What was once only science fiction is now becoming a reality, and we need to ensure that experimentation and subsequent ramifications do not outpace ethical discussion and societal decisions," Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kansas, said in a statement.

Brownback is the author of the bill Coleman and 17 other senators co-sponsored.

"As someone who has consistently protected the sanctity of human life, Senator Coleman will not support any research that would result in human-animal hybrids," said his spokesman LeRoy Coleman. "This type of experimentation not only raises serious ethical concerns, but also public health issues. In Congress, Senator Coleman has been leading the effort to discover and promote ethical stem cell research, and he is certain that the creation of human-animal hybrids is not the answer."

Last year the Senate passed a Coleman-authored bill which would expand federal funding for stem cell research that does not harm embryos.

More visible in UK

There are several reasons why the UK's move into the hybrid-embryo research has prompted such heated reaction even while similar studies have been conducted in American labs, Kahn said.

A major reason is that the British system regulates stem cell research in a way that makes it far more visible than in the United States.

The hullabaloo in American politics is over federal funding for stem cell research. That's the tip of the iceberg. Much of the work is in privately funded labs, Kahn said, where scientists are free to experiment with human-animal combinations.

In the British system, the special authority regulating the research made public this year that it had granted licenses to two research teams for experiments with human-animal hybrids. One of the teams, at Newcastle University, announced in April that it had created the first part-animal, part-human embryos, the BBC reported.

Meanwhile, opponents of the research had moved in Parliament to ban it, while proponents pushed a bill that would affirm the right for scientists to continue the studies under strict controls.

It would be illegal to implant the animal-human embryos into women or any animal. In other words, no babies could be born from them. It also would be illegal to keep them beyond 14 days, which gives scientists time to extract stem cell lines, but stops the embryo short of a point many say defines the beginning of a person.

Opponents were not satisfied. "We do not believe that regulation is enough," Edward Leigh, a Conservative Catholic Member of Parliament, said in the BBC report. "In embryos, we do have the genetic makeup of a complete human being and we could not and should not be spliced together with the animal kingdom."

Read the complete story at www.minnpost.com.

Sharon Schmickle can be reached at sschmickle@minnpost.com.

The Daily Glean: Minneapolis: now 27 percent safer!

By DAVID BRAUER

Minneapolis violent-crime rates fell 14 percent for 2008's first six months over 2007; violent crime is down 27 percent from 2006. The Strib's Abby Simons notes that murders fell from 35 in 2006 to 19 this year, but every major crime category was down, almost all by double-digits. Authorities credit targeted juvenile enforcement and more cops. Only quibble: 2006 was a peak year; the Strib's new InfoCenter should have longer-term charting.

Related: The public-safety budget picture is not so great in Greater Minnesota; Minnesota 2020's Carrie Beck looks at how outstate cities' public-safety expenditures have fallen since 2003's local-government aid cuts.

Via Metroblogging's Erica M., three Minnesota same-sex couples will sue the state for equal civil-marriage rights. They'll be represented by a "name" firm, Mansfield, Tanick and Cohen, and are looking for couples to join the legal effort. The state has an anti-marriage DOMA law, and the Supreme Court is studded with Pawlentians, but given verdicts in other states, it's probably worth a try.

Al Franken unveiled a tax plan yesterday, which the Strib inexplicably buried behind its second consecutive Xcel Center reconfiguration section-fronter. (Folks, it's not that interesting.) According to MPR's Mark Zdechlik, a \$6.5 billion plan would cover a third of child costs for people making \$100,000 or less, and a \$2,000 credit for families taking care of sick relatives. The Strib's Patricia Lopez says Franken would create mobile "401Us" with a capped 30-percent government match of each retirement-savings dollar; it's allegedly revenue-neutral.

More Franken: he refuses to debate DFL primary opponent Priscilla Lord Faris, the Strib's Kevin Duchscher reports, noting 17 pre-endorsement debates and a focus on Norm Coleman. In the waning days of the DFL endorse-

ment fight, Franken stayed away from head-to-head meetings with Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer.

Third District GOP Congressional hopeful Erik Paulsen criticized fellow Republican John McCain for offering a "blank check" on Iraq, reports the D.C. publication The Hill via MPR's Tom Scheck. Scheck notes Paulsen still has no statements about Iraq on his campaign website.

Minnesota Independent's Paul Demko keeps banging away at the ongoing problems finding cops to patrol the Republican National Convention. The latest: the St. Paul P.D. claims 40 officers from the state's Gang Strike Force are on board. Problem: the unit has only 33 officers, and they haven't signed on. The PiPress's Mara Gottfried and Dave Orrick say the effort is 600 officers short, though some departments are sending a bigger force than listed.

Related: The U.S. Justice Department wants to counsel convention protesters and cops, the Strib's Randy Furst reports. The new scariest words in the English language: "We're from the Bush Administration and we're here to help." St. Paul cops are down with the plan, but two protest groups are not. I believe this is the same Justice Department unit that's mediated dealings with Minneapolis activists and cops, to the activists' general satisfaction.

Minnesota Monthly's Michael Tortorello has an in-depth profile of an enigmatic Tim Pawlenty. "Even the closest of Pawlenty watchers will learn something new from the profile," gushes MPR's Scheck.

The city of St. Paul declares it won't use tax breaks to lure businesses downtown, writes the PiPress's Dave Orrick. (Things like the Lawson Software deal are "so passe," Orrick quips.) Instead, a public-private partnership will offer specialized spiffs such as commercial real-estate searches that businesses would otherwise pay for. There's also talk of "streamlin-

ing" the city's permit processes.

Uuuuuunion! Two Starbucks Mall of America employees staged a brief work stoppage yesterday, writes the PiPress's Julie Forster. They were protesting how the shrinking coffee giant treats laid-off colleagues. The Strib's Matt McKinney notes that a worker "laid off last week for union activities" says his fellows will join the International Workers of the World, aka the "Wobblies." They claim to represent 200 Starbucks baristas, Forster notes; the company has drawn federal union-busting sanctions.

Tom Petters may have \$2.2 billion in sales, but he's screwing magazine workers out of back pay and accrued vacation, writes the Strib's Chris Serres. Petters acquired Metropolitan Media Group last week and renamed it, which somehow lets him ding 26-year-old grunt-workers of \$2,800 in just compensation. "Under the business plan [paying up] was just not something we were able to do," says a spokester. Several employee/punishment-gluttons were offered new jobs, but no back pay. Lawsuits are possible.

I thought this was a misprint, but a "Fire Arts" center is opening in south Minneapolis. No, it's not about coal-walking, but, writes Southside Pride's Dennis Geisinger, a place for "sculptural welding, blacksmithing, foundry, jewelry-making, enameling, glassworking, neon, electronics/LED, and fire performance." So maybe there will be coal dancing! The 38th & Chicago center is an Artspace project.

On a grander scale, Guthrie attendance was up by a quarter, or 80,000 theatergoers, in the first full year at the new megacomplex. The Strib's Graydon Royce reports theater income as also up 25 percent, and there was a tiny budget surplus. Performances rose by a third, but the economy produced a tiny dip in subscribers and a 5 percent endowment drop.

If there's going to be a Plan-

etarium above Hennepin County's downtown Minneapolis library, the city will have to pony up, the Strib's Steve Brandt writes. The "cash-strapped" burgh would have to help fund a \$563,000-\$622,000 subsidy over the Planetarium's first five years. A downtown developer floats the notion of putting the Planetarium above his project.

A PiPress editorial decrying juror per-diem cuts notes that the feds pay \$40 a day for listening to their trials; Minnesota will soon pay \$10. That "may not even cover parking" for a role that "should be treated with the utmost respect." Editorialists wonder if this particular cut was made to get public attention, but with public defenders being beheaded, the pain needs to be spread.

Are you ready for electric boats? The PiPress's Gita Sitaramiah says battery-powered outboards are the aqua version of hybrid cars. Travelers Co. will cut your insurance 10 percent for buying one. Big downside: they cost 20 percent more, though payback is two years at current prices. The real crippler for the speed set: they don't go faster than 10 mph.

Good thing: U researchers say the state can meet its ambitious greenhouse-gas emission-reduction goals, a relief since it's the law. According to MPR's Stephanie Hemphill, we'll need cleaner fuel, cleaner vehicles, and transportation choices. Car-wise, the state will need to tax guzzlers and rebate sippers, plus get more fuel from renewables like biomass (where Sweden gets a third of its juice). No price tag, though.

Freak beat: Police rescued 29 Taiwanese fighting cocks from an East Bethel ring and found 25 people watching the avian blood sport. (Video here.) An Eagan doctor has sex with two patients, including one for over 20 years; loses license.

Nort spews: The Yanks walloped the Twins 12-4; Minnesota remains a half-game out of first.

COMMUNITY VOICES

Sen. John Marty: Cut transit fares to 25 cents

By State Sen. JOHN MARTY

\$4-per-gallon gas is causing great hardship, but Minnesota can turn that problem into an opportunity to protect the environment, reduce traffic congestion, and help low- and middle-income people cope, simply by substantially cutting public transit fares.

Unfortunately, just when we should be increasing bus and rail ridership, the Metropolitan Council proposes to move us in the opposite direction by raising fares. Boosting fares reduces ridership, while cutting fares increases it.

The Met Council's decision to raise fares due to higher fuel prices and insufficient funding is not surprising, but it is disappointing. When these higher fares reduce the number of riders, it simultaneously increases the number of auto trips, which in turn produces more congestion and wear and tear on roads.

What if we tried a bold new approach to transit and transportation issues? Imagine what would happen if we were to reduce all transit fares to 25 cents per ride. Experience from around the country shows that ridership would soar. The biggest problem with such a change would be that Minnesota's transit systems would be unable to handle all the passengers.

A problem we'd love to have

Too many transit riders? If

we are concerned about too many cars on the road and the congestion and environmental harm from those cars, this sharp increase in bus and rail passengers is a problem we'd love to have. Transit systems would need to add routes and increase frequency. And with more routes and more frequent service, ridership would increase even more.

The Twin Cities, where three-quarters of the population live in the suburbs, lacks sufficient suburb-to-suburb transit. One creative constituent proposed to the Met Council that we add a series of bus routes on the I-494/694 beltway. During rush hour they could use the freeway shoulders to bypass congestion.

Additional transit corridors and more frequent service would be needed throughout the state. As new buses are added, the use of hybrid and clean fuel technology would provide even greater environmental benefits.

This proposal would require a significant increase in state support for transit systems to make up for their lost fare revenue and higher costs. But it would be the least expensive way to handle growing congestion and reduce auto emissions.

Only small portion of revenue would be lost

The cost is not as much as some would think. Cutting fares for Metro Transit from the current \$1.50 to \$2.75 down to a

flat 25-cent fare for buses and LRT would obviously reduce fare-box revenue. But the public already pays well over three-fourths of the cost of the transit system, so lower fares take away only a small portion of the revenue. In fact, with the jump in ridership, the public cost of each individual ride would drop significantly. (A bus or rail car costs virtually the same amount to operate whether it has 15 or 50 passengers.)

Alternatives to this proposal are not cheap. The Met Council's proposed fare increase is projected to bring in about \$7 million more per year. Even so, it projects a revenue shortage of \$30 to \$40 million per year by 2011. On top of that, the cost of expanding roads and highways to handle the growing congestion has a price tag in the billions, not the millions that transit improvements and fare cuts would require. Also, this cost analysis excludes the environmental costs of driving more cars and building more roads. The 25-cent-fare proposal would ultimately save taxpayers money.

There are other benefits of the 25-cent fare. It would provide much-needed savings for low-income people struggling with high food and energy costs. The enhanced service to handle the surge in passengers would make it easier for seniors and others who rely on transit to get to their doctor, the store, their church or wherever they

need to go.

An unbelievably timid goal

The Met Council has the unbelievably timid goal of doubling transit ridership by 2030. Under that scenario the increase in riders wouldn't even keep up with population growth, and road congestion would continue to get worse. Minnesota's transit systems are already behind those in many other states and further yet behind those in other countries.

If we follow this bold vision instead, we can make things better, likely doubling ridership in four years — and then doubling it again four years later.

The Met Council is headed in the wrong direction. It should cancel the fare increase now, and prepare to go to the Legislature in January to get funding to cut fares. To prime this discussion I introduced legislation, Senate File 3888, which would establish a flat 25-cent fare for bus and rail in public-transit systems in communities throughout Minnesota. This legislation would not solve our transportation woes, but it would be a big step forward.

State Sen. John Marty, DFL-Roseville, represents Minnesota Senate District 54. This article originally appeared in the To the Point! newsletter on the Apple Pie Alliance website.

Want to add your voice?

If you're interested in joining the discussion by writing a Community Voices article, email Susan Albright at salbright@minnpost.com.