

# ProRail Nebraska Board Meeting

**Saturday, July 11 - 9:00 am to Noon**

**Because of the coronavirus pandemic**

**we will utilize a conference phone line for this meeting**

All ProRail Nebraska members are invited to attend.

We will discuss bills before this session of the Nebraska Legislature affecting railroads and public transit in our state and other ProRail business.

For dial-in instructions, please contact Bob Kuzelka 402-417-9424 [rkuzelka1@unl.edu](mailto:rkuzelka1@unl.edu)

## **StarTran's Battery Electric Buses Have Arrived!**

By Richard Schmeling, President, Citizens for Improved Transit, April 28, 2020



Battery-electric bus in service on Route 49 in Lincoln on 4/7/2020 - Photo by Richard Schmeling

Lincoln's StarTran Bus Service received its first four zero-emission battery-electric buses this Spring and placed in service the first week of April. The buses were manufactured by New Flyer, and they resemble StarTrans CNG (compressed natural gas) buses both exterior and interior. They are numbered in the 400-series, and a total of ten were ordered. Because of the high demand for electric buses and limited manufacturing capacity, it took over two years for delivery of the first four buses.

I have ridden the new electric buses, and they are SWEET! They are so quiet when stopped that, compared to the diesels, it sounds like they are shut off. Acceleration is quiet, and going down the street all you hear is tire noise on the pavement.

One design defect is that they don't have an "idiot light" to indicate low electric power in the batteries. The operator has to watch a dial like a gas gauge. One driver got caught halfway through the shift with batteries drained, and a rescue bus had to be sent.

Drivers like the new buses for the most part. They are a little doggy on acceleration, but don't transition through gears like a diesel bus. Some of the Gillig diesel buses, especially the short 200-series, tend to be rough shifters as they transition through the gears.

The new buses are equipped with regenerative braking. When the driver applies the brakes, the traction motor switches to generator mode braking the bus, and the electricity generated during braking is used to help recharge the batteries. However, drivers report that the brake pedal is slow in coming back up when the bus comes to a stop.

The remaining six electric buses in the New Flyer order are scheduled to be delivered this Summer.

Like Omaha's Metro Transit, StarTran saw a huge drop in ridership due to the Coronavirus Pandemic. On weekdays buses generally operate on Saturday schedules, and passengers are required to board and exit through the rear door to maintain a safe distance from the drivers. No fares are being collected. Operation of the Downtown trolley shuttle bus was suspended for the duration of the pandemic.

### Midwest Rail Rangers Offers Train Route Guide Books

By Clyde Anderson - April 12, 2020



Midwest Rail Rangers is a non-profit organization presenting onboard educational programs across the Upper Midwest.

Like many businesses and other non-profit around the country, the Midwest Rail Rangers are also struggling to a degree during this uncertain pandemic. While their Interpretive Guides are not on the trains giving programs... and they are not able to do outreach events (which serve as their major fundraisers)... their bills continue to roll in. They must still continue to pay things like liability insurance, maintenance for speakers systems and other equipment, website hosting, and much more. To help Midwest Rail Rangers during this time, there are several options. Their

website (<http://www.railrangers.org>) allows you to make a direct donation of any amount --- simply click on the button on the lower left-hand side of the screen.

You can also show your support for the Midwest Rail Rangers by purchasing their railroad route guide books, PDF e-books, MP3 podcasts, wood depot signs, and much more. The Midwest Rail Rangers Store's online page can be reached by just heading over to <http://www.MidwestRails.com>. Check out their selection of train route guides. Some of the routes covered are shown on the map above.



### **Virtual Railfan now has cameras at Kearney, NE**

By Clyde Anderson - March 25, 2020

Are you suffering from cabin fever cooped up inside during this coronavirus pandemic? If you have a good internet connection, you can do a lot of "virtual" train watching using your computer.

Last May, [Virtual Railfan](#) added a new railcam site in Kearney, NE allowing railfans to view trains on Union Pacific's busy triple-track main line between Omaha and North Platte. There are two cameras: one facing east and other facing west. Kearney is in a "quiet zone" where trains don't blow their horns for grade crossings. However, the cameras are located just east of a grade crossing. So the sound of the crossing bells and electronic horns to warn motorists and pedestrians warn railcam viewers when a train is approaching.

Right now you can view the cameras for free on YouTube. Check the PRN website for a list of railcams available for free viewing. This list changes almost daily with some reverting to viewing only by paid Virtual Railfan subscribers. Better yet, [Click Here](#) and subscribe to Virtual Railfan for access to 79 railcams at 48 locations in 23 states plus railcams in 4 other countries.



## Omaha Metro Hosts Public ORBT Open House

By Clyde Anderson - March 11, 2020

I attended the ORBT Public Meeting Wednesday, March 11th at the UNO Thompson Alumni Center. It was an open house format with several information stations with posters and/or information tables with O-Metro employees to answer questions. B-Cycle also had a information station since they will have bike rental stations near most of the ORBT stops.

Jason Rose, Outreach Coordinator for the ORBT Project, provided some new details about the fare system ORBT will be using. There will be three fare payment options: smart fare cards that you can load value to using an internet ap, a smart phone ap, and ticket vending machines at the ORBT stations. The tickets will have bar codes. When boarding an ORBT bus, near every door will be a scanner that boarding passengers will swipe their fare card, smart phone, or ticket to verify fare payment. O-Metro regular buses will also have a scanner by the front door for fare payment by smart fare card, smart phone ap, or bar-code ticket. These buses will retain their fare boxes to accept cash fares and the old fare cards.

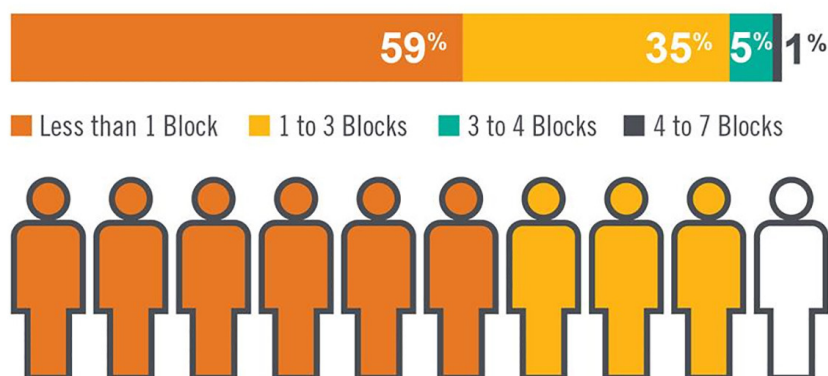
O-Metro's Linda Barrett said that there will likely be another series of public meetings late this summer to explain the new fare collection system and provide more details of the ORBT implementation this Fall.

O-Metro finally announced its decision on what will happen to the Route 2 local service on Dodge St. when ORBT service starts next Fall. Route 2 service will be discontinued. This will result in some existing Route 2 passengers having to walk much farther to their nearest ORBT stop. Route 2 stops are about 1/8-mile apart whereas ORBT stations will be approximately 1/2-mile apart.

### PROXIMITY TO ORBT STATIONS



By replacing Route 2 with ORBT, bus stops for **9 out of 10 riders** will change by 3 blocks or less.



O-Metro used this graphic to explain that only 6% of existing Route 2 riders will have to walk 3 or more blocks to their nearest ORBT station.

Here is the proposed schedules O-Metro has planned for ORBT when it begins service next Fall:

- every 10 minutes on weekdays from about 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.
- every 15 minutes on Saturdays and Sundays
- every 20 minutes during early morning and late evening hours all days

**DRAFT 5/20/2020**

Summary of ProRail Nebraska Board Meeting  
Held by Zoom as arranged by President Roque  
May 16, 2020 – 9 am

Attendance: By video/audio – Roque, Kuzelka, Anderson  
By audio – Schmeling, Hayden, Hanna, Tuttle, Goeke

1. The meeting was called to order by President Roque.
2. The Kuzelka Meeting Summary of the 4/4/2020 PRN BD MTG was approved.
3. Hayden reported that the current PRN bank account holds \$12,023. Motion passed to approve payment of \$90 to a CPA for preparing the annual PRN 990 form required by IRS – Kuzelka/Schmeling. Motion passed to approve paying \$1000 to UNL BOSR for PRN participation in 2020 NASIS through Kuzelka’s UNL cost object number and to reimburse UNL when invoiced – Tuttle/Schmeling
4. Motion passed to appoint Randy Goeke (Atkinson, NE) to complete term as Director for District #3 which was vacated by James Baldus – Tuttle/Schmeling **Welcome Randy!**
5. The status of the current PRN Articles of Incorporation and By-Laws were discussed. Motion passed to change the registered corporation office address from 3915 Apple Street, Lincoln, NE to 5544 S. 80<sup>th</sup> Street, Lincoln, NE which is the current registered address in the NE Secretary of State Office – Schmeling/Tuttle. Anderson will get a current dated copy of both documents to post on the PRN website and to send to Kuzelka for distribution to all board members.
6. A motion passed to hold the PRN fall members/public meeting on October 10, 2020 in Omaha, NE which will also be the annual meeting for election of officers and district representatives – Schmeling/Tuttle
7. Hanna reported on his telephone meeting with NE’s federal congressional delegation as part of PRA virtual Washington, DC lobbying on March 31, 2020. He was able to talk with all delegates or their staff except for Congressman Smith. He felt the visit went well and were favorable towards funding AMTRAK. He will send copies of the summaries of his visits to all PRN board members. He reported that PRA is cautiously optimistic about the newly appointed AMTRAK CEO. He also raised the issue of new financial support from the States of Kansas and Oklahoma for the extension of the Heartland Flier from Dallas to Newton, KS.
8. Schmeling reported on his explorations into a passenger rail education/information/promotion luncheon meeting with NE State Senators and their staff. It was agreed that such a meeting should be as a noon luncheon early in the 2021 session. Schmeling will continue to work on details to include program content and design and hosting by senators. It was suggested that Schmeling contact Ernie Voss, Creighton University Heider College of Business as a speaker for such a meeting. There was no report on development of the “white paper” to be used with such a meeting.

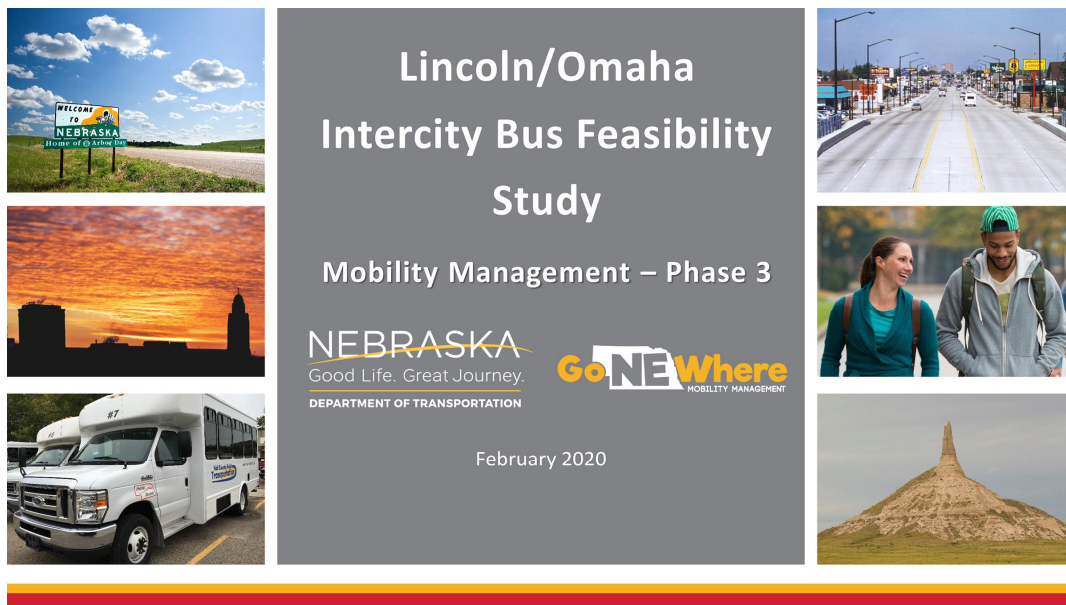
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9. Kuzelka reported on the passenger rail interest survey to legislative candidates to be conducted in July with results to be distributed and publicized before the November 3<sup>rd</sup> election. It was decided that the survey would be sent to all NE state and federal legislators to include incumbents. The survey would consist of the four questions used in the 2020 NASIS and one question to determine their experience if any with traveling via passenger rail. The survey would

be distributed and returned by USPS. Roque will explore doing the survey by email with electronic response such as through Survey Monkey.

10. Kuzelka reported on the May 12, 2020 meeting of the 33<sup>rd</sup> and Cornhusker Advisory Committee. A preferred design is now being subjected to the required environmental impact review process. At that meeting a major discussion was held about the need and design for a pedestrian crossing structure at 44<sup>th</sup> and Cornhusker where the current surface auto and pedestrian RR crossing will be closed. The PRN Board agreed that such a structure was necessary in the project's design and implementation.
11. The next PRN BD MTG will be Saturday, 11 JUL 2020 in Lincoln or by ZOOM.

Draft submitted by Bob Kuzelka



## Lincoln-Omaha Intercity Bus Feasibility Study - An Update

By Clyde Anderson - March 10, 2020

The Nebraska Dept. of Transportation has been studying the feasibility of intercity commuter bus service between Omaha and Lincoln.

I attended NDOT's Feb. 26 public meeting at South Omaha's Kroc Center. [A link to view a PDF of the slide presentation from the meeting can be found on the PRN website.](#) It shows proposed routes, stops, economics, and more.

Then on March 1 an article appeared in the Omaha World Herald saying NDOT was seeking bids for the service!

I have long supported a bus commuter service between Omaha and Lincoln because it can be implemented quickly, it's much less expensive than rail which allows much more frequent service. Buses will serve O-Metro's Westroads and Aksarben Transit Centers as well as Epply Airport and the Amtrak/Intercity Bus Terminal. In Lincoln stops will include the StarTran Downtown Transit Center and several UNL locations.