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For St. Paul's Union Depot, a rebirth

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By Nancy Crotti

Tags: [Jim McDonough](#), [Jones Lang LaSalle](#), [Josh Collins](#), [Metropolitan Council](#), [Mortenson Construction](#), [One on One Bicycle Studio](#), [Ramsey County Regional Railroad Authority](#), [Union Depot](#)



Josh Collins, a spokesman for the Ramsey County Regional Railroad Authority, leads a tour of Metropolitan Council members in the 300-foot waiting room. The rail authority, which owns the depot, has also offered public tours of the depot since March. (Photos: Bill Klotz)

Transit hub will return to its roots early next year

After 41 idle years, St. Paul's Union Depot is poised to return to its roots as a transit hub.

The renovation and restoration of the 1920s station, with its majestic columns, soaring barrel-vault ceilings and terrazzo floors, is about 70 percent complete. The work should wrap up by the end of this year, with service by Metro Transit and Jefferson Lines buses, Amtrak trains and taxis beginning in early 2013, said Jim McDonough, chairman of the [Ramsey County Regional Railroad Authority](#) and a county commissioner.

Central Corridor light rail transit trains are scheduled to begin operating in 2014, with the depot as their eastern hub. The line will run between the downtowns of St. Paul and Minneapolis.

[Mortenson Construction](#) is the general contractor on the \$243 million project, of which \$148 million constitutes construction costs, said Josh Collins, spokesman for the Ramsey County Regional Railroad Authority.

The rail authority, which owns the depot, has offered public tours of the depot since March. Last week, it gave a tour to a group with a special interest in public transportation — the [Metropolitan Council](#).

Council members donned hard hats, neon yellow vests and goggles to view the 268,000-square-foot building, which holds 40,000 square feet of potential retail space, including a 3,300-square-foot bicycle center. When completed, the center will have showers, restrooms, lockers and racks to store 50 bicycles.

The authority is scheduled to vote Tuesday on whether to approve [Jones Lang LaSalle](#) as property manager and developer of the depot's retail, cultural and event space. The Chicago-based company, which has a Minneapolis office, has experience with transit facilities including Grand Central Terminal in New York City, Chicago Union Station and Union Station in Washington, D.C., according to the authority. A phone call to the company was not returned.

Other companies that submitted bids for the facility management contract were John E. Mannillo & Associates of St. Paul; Bauch Enterprises Inc. of Bloomington; and Colliers International, which has a Minnetonka office.

The authority is also set to vote Tuesday on whether to approve [One on One Bicycle Studio](#), a Minneapolis bicycle and coffee shop, as operator of the bicycle center at the depot. The only other bidder was Bikestation of Long Beach, Calif.

The depot's head house is on the National Register of Historic Places, which means the work must restore the building as closely as possible to its original design, construction materials and color scheme.

Thus, the flooring in an area of the building's Great Hall occupied by Christos Restaurant had to be replaced with pink Tennessee marble to match the rest of the floor. The concrete walls, which were originally scored to make them look like stone, have been painted a goldenrod shade.

The building, at 214 E. Fourth St., between Sibley and Wacouta streets, extends beyond the Great Hall into a cavernous, 300-foot-long waiting room. Three large skylights in its 38-foot ceiling were blacked out during World War II for fear of attack because so many military personnel moved through the station, Collins said.

The skylights have been cleaned and restored, as have the arches that bracket the skylights, each arch embedded with crimson rosettes. A frieze representing the history of transportation adorns the upper walls.



The Union Depot in St. Paul, as seen from Fourth Street, was built in the 1920s. In its heyday nearly 300 trains a day, carrying 40,000 people, passed through the depot. (Staff photos: Bill Klotz)

The rail authority plans to lease space along the southern wall of the waiting room as well as space in a mezzanine level at the eastern end of the room to retail users.

Nearly 300 trains a day, carrying 40,000 people, passed through the depot in its heyday. One of the 10 original stairwells has been preserved and will be used to display historic artifacts. Wooden kiosks that once stood between the stairwells are also being restored and will display digital information about transit arrivals and departures.

Workers are transforming the platform that once held 20 sets of train tracks to accommodate buses, future regional rail and tracks for Amtrak, which will move from its current station on Pierce Butler Route in the city's Midway section. The United States Postal Service, which closed its seven-story Art Deco building at 180 Kellogg Blvd. in 2009, removed the original tracks years ago to use the platform as a storage area.

An original carriageway that runs beneath the building was widened to accommodate Metro Mobility buses and other vehicles with passengers who need to use an elevator to access the upper floors. A mural will be painted on one wall, financed by \$1 million the authority is dedicating to public art at the depot, McDonough said.

Public reaction to the depot has been extraordinary, Collins said. The Met Council was also impressed.

"It really helps to see it," said council Chairwoman Susan Haigh after the tour. "You really get a sense of how it's going to work and come together."

Council Member Richard Kramer, whose district includes the depot area, said he plans to bring a contingent of East Side community leaders on a May 24 tour.

"It's really striking the amount of progress they have made," Kramer said. "From a St. Paul standpoint, I think people sort of see it as kind of a missing link. There's been all of this activity or redevelopment in downtown and Lowertown, and while there are certainly many more opportunities for investment in downtown St. Paul, this is a big piece that really pulls things together."

See below for a slideshow of the Union Depot by photographer Bill Klotz. Click on any of the photos for a description:



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