

Orange crush

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Passengers jockey for position to get precious rush hour seats on the Orange Line.

The [Orange Line](#) is feeling the squeeze. An immediate success upon its opening in 2005, ridership continues to surge on the San Fernando Valley's dedicated busway, which runs from Woodland Hills and Chatsworth to North Hollywood. The line currently handles more than 30,000 passengers on an average weekday, making it the second busiest bus line in Los Angeles County. While that success is something to celebrate, elbow room is getting hard to come by.

"Yesterday it was pretty miserable," said Mark Hill, who commutes between Sherman Oaks and downtown Los Angeles. "You had people letting the bus go because you could just not fit any more."

Metro plans to relieve some pressure by adding additional service. Next week, the agency's Board of Directors is expected to take action on an annual budget that includes \$1.2 million for more midday buses on the Orange Line. More late night service was also added recently, and increased Saturday service is planned for late June.

Jon Hillmer, a 30-year veteran in Metro's bus operations, said the popularity is due to the line's speed and convenience.

"It offers rail-like service on rubber tires," Hillmer said. "People board at stations, wait on platforms and pay their fares at machines."

The line also provides important connections to other transit options. At Chatsworth station, it connects to Metrolink's service to Ventura County. At the North Hollywood station, it connects to the Red Line subway, which provides access to Hollywood, downtown L.A. and the rest of Metro's rail system.

While improvements are planned to handle the growth in ridership during off-peak hours, rush hour is a different

story. One additional bus trip will be squeezed onto the back end of the peak traffic period but, after that, the agency is just about maxed out on how many buses it can run at a time. Among other issues, the line is constrained at intersections with north-south roadways, which are managed by the city of Los Angeles' Department of Transportation.

"Running buses every 4 minutes during rush hour is the best we can do under the current traffic configuration," Hillmer said. "The city is reluctant to go below the 4-minute frequency level."

Jonathan Hui, a spokesman for the city agency, said it allows buses to pass through the intersections every two minutes, but they only get special priority—early or longer green lights—every four minutes. That preferential treatment is important to keep the line moving swiftly.

"Not everybody can get the green at the same time," Hui said. "The Orange Line is obviously important, but so are drivers, pedestrians and bicyclists."

The two agencies are currently working on a solution to the problem. Hillmer said possibilities include sending two buses in tandem through intersections, or getting shorter but more frequent green lights to enable more buses to get through.

While the rush hour fixes remain a work in progress, adding extra buses during off-peak hours should be a big help to riders who crowd the Orange Line before and after rush hour.

"At 7:45 p.m., there are still a lot of people waiting," said Isabel Barbosa, who commutes from her home in Woodland Hills to downtown L.A. Even at 8:30 p.m., "it's usually standing room only," said another commuter, Ian Tudor.

Most of the current rider congestion occurs between the station at Sepulveda Boulevard and North Hollywood, but as last June's [extension of the line to Chatsworth](#) matures, Hillmer expects more growth on the western end.

Ridership probably hasn't even peaked for the year. The months of September and October, when students return to school, are typically the busiest. The extra riders should push the line's numbers closer to those of Metro's busiest bus line—the 720 Rapid, which runs between Commerce and Santa Monica on Wilshire Boulevard and averages about 40,000 riders each weekday.

Despite the ridership boom, Orange Line commuters like Mark Hill say they appreciate the smooth, fast ride the line offers—even when it's standing room only.

"The buses are nicely appointed," he said. "There's plenty of stuff to hang on to."

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