

Record numbers riding easy on Expo

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January 29, 2014



The parking lot at Expo's Culver City station fills up quickly as ridership on the line booms.

The first phase of the Expo Line is getting up to speed—six years ahead of schedule.

Metro had projected the line would be carrying 27,000 riders a day by 2020. It has been surpassing that mark since last fall. In December, an average of 27,360 rode it every weekday.

And, in a win-win for passengers and the transit agency, the line's success hasn't translated to overcrowded train cars, at least so far.

Tiffany Laurence, 24, uses Expo to commute from downtown Los Angeles to Culver City. She said that seats are plentiful, even during the morning and evening rush.

"Those are the only times I have someone sitting next to me," Laurence said. "Normally, I have a whole row to myself—it's so luxurious."

Bruce Shelburne, Metro's rail operations chief, is also glad for the extra room. He said the line will need the seating capacity when the second phase to Santa Monica opens in 2015. Shelburne expects that to draw flocks of commuters and tourists, even on the weekends. "We're not breathing hard and we're at 27,000," he said. "If we were at 40,000 I'd be awfully nervous."

For now, the extra room offers easygoing rides to people like Jerry Davis, a Houston, Texas, city councilmember who was in town on business on a recent Wednesday.

"The only lines we've seen have been the traffic lines, so it makes us want to come to the rail," Davis said. "It's a

nice, sunny day—we're putting less emissions into the air and saving the environment."

Samantha Bricker, Chief Operating Officer for the Exposition Rail Authority, said much of the ridership comes from the numerous entertainment venues and institutions that are along the way, like Staples Center and the University of Southern California. She also said the line draws a lot of people from the Westside. A 600-space park-and-ride lot at the Culver City station—the furthest west spot on the Expo Line so far—regularly fills to capacity in the morning.

Aside from getting people from Point A to Point B, Expo also seems to be changing how they live. Sandip Chakrabarti, a Ph.D. candidate in urban planning at USC, has been studying how the Expo Line has affected the way people who live in the area get around. "There is evidence that it has altered travel behavior quite a bit," he said. "People near Expo stations have been driving a lot less." On a personal note, he said that when the line starting running it enabled him to move from an area near the school to Culver City, which he prefers.

For commuters like Peyton McElyea, who takes the rail to his real estate job in downtown Los Angeles, a major part of driving less is being able to use travel time more productively.

"You can read the Wall Street Journal, the morning paper, you can respond to email," said McElyea. "You know you have that 30-minute block where you can get something done. It's better than being there with your hands on the wheel."

Metro's Shelburne said McElyea's perspective is not uncommon; rail transit is generally becoming more popular across the board.

"The train's sexy, that's the bottom line," Shelburne said. And the unpredictable traffic on the frequently-gridlocked 10 Freeway doesn't hurt that appeal. "The train is dependable. It's going to be that way every day."

Posted 1/21/14

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