

[← Back](#)

MAIN STREET LIGHT RAIL - Thousands take a test ride on the opening day for Houston's light rail - Massed transit - Most enthusiastic despite the crush

By LUCAS WALL, RON NISSIMOV January 2, 2004 Publication: Houston Chronicle Page: 1 Word Count: 1487

The masses almost overwhelmed Houston's newest means of transportation Thursday during Metro's four-hour public opening of its first light rail line.

Some 15,000 people rode the trains as the Metropolitan Transit Authority kicked off 2004 with the launch of service on its \$324 million Main Street line. At the Fannin South Park & Ride, the track's southernmost stop, nearly 800 wannabe passengers snaked through the parking lot by mid-afternoon. Those finally nearing the boarding platform said they had been there two hours. Despite the long waits, nearly everyone appeared patient and enthusiastic. It was the first appearance of transit trains in Houston since the last trolley stopped running in June 1940. Betty Luehr, 77, a native Houstonian, compared being able to ride the rails in Houston again to the 1969 landing on the moon. "Who would have ever thought?" she said while on a southbound train. "I wouldn't have missed this first ride for anything." Marilyn Park of southwest Houston said she won't take the train often but believes many others will. "Houston has needed this for many, many years and we're excited to have it finally here," she said. "It's added so much to our city." Metro is offering free train rides from 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. today through Sunday. To let more folks sample the trains, Metro will ask passengers to ride one direction and then take a free bus back to their starting point. "They almost overwhelmed us today," Metro spokesman Ken Connaughton said Thursday evening. "We had no way of knowing what to expect. There's a limitation on how many people we could carry in four hours. We hit the limitation." What began as a gentle suggestion to ride the train only one way to allow others a chance to board became an order as lines grew at several stations. Metro also started dispatching some empty trains from end stations to pick up passengers who had been waiting a long time in Midtown, the Museum District and the Texas Medical Center. Most of the hundreds who waited at Fannin South took the delay in stride. "It doesn't bother me," said Wendy Heger, a fourth-generation Houstonian who said she was excited to finally have rail in her hometown. "It's the first day, what can you expect?" said Heger, who waited with her husband and 14-month-old son. "If I didn't want to be here, I could have left." Some could be overheard grumbling, however. "It's not a good day for Metro," said a weary Shelley Nadel, who nevertheless remained calm as she waited with her husband and two daughters. "They've managed to take a good thing and make a debacle out of it." Cloria Andres of east Houston said, "I didn't have anything else to do anyway, so you stick to your plan." She added, "Everybody was so cooperative and nice." Mayor Lee Brown, whose term expires today with the inauguration of Bill White, helped pilot the first passenger-carrying train out of the rail yard at 10 a.m. and through a banner into Fannin South. Invited guests gathered there for the grand opening ceremony and watched Brown and several other dignitaries use gigantic scissors to cut the ribbon, officially opening the 7 1/2-mile line to passengers. Confetti shot from canisters along the tracks and rock music blasted as those in attendance crammed into the first train, which quickly reached its estimated 400 capacity. The first train full of VIPs pulled out of Fannin South at 10:17 a.m. for the inaugural run north to the University of Houston-Downtown. The 29-minute trip was filled with loud chatter and numerous cheers as the train passed various landmarks. Some squeezed into the packed train remarked they felt like they were in New York or Europe, a comment that would echo throughout New Year's Day as trains stuffed with Houstonians traveled up and down the tracks. It was a sight rail supporters cheered, exuberant that three decades of debate and three years of construction had finally come to an end. Many labeled it a historic day for the city and a turning point for its development, forever changing the Bayou City's face. "This is the kind of load we want every day," Metro President and CEO Shirley DeLiberio said while standing in the crush of riders on board the first train. "When I came here, I said, 'We are going to build rail in Houston.' I knew it was going to be a fight, but I didn't know it was quite as tough as it turned out to be. But you know what, anything good is worth fighting for." Brown said his thoughts drifted back to his first campaign for mayor in 1997, when he promised voters he would get Metro to build a rail line to make Houston a "world-class city." "You really get a different view of the city riding the train," Brown said after disembarking at UH-D. "You can see all of the development taking place along Main Street. It's really a delightful ride. I'm extremely happy. A good way to end my term." Many of the first passengers were glowing with joy after the

inaugural run. "My little heart got warm," chuckled Bob Eury, director of the Houston Downtown Management District and president of Central Houston, which built Main Street Square, a pedestrian plaza along the rail line that also opened Thursday. Metro Chairman Arthur Schechter called it "really a little overwhelming." The project will play a big role in "making Houston a better city for our future, a better place for our children and grandchildren," he said. Metro took over regional bus service on Jan. 1, 1979, so Thursday's initiation of rail marked its 25th birthday. Julia Toness of Katy, riding a southbound train later in the day, said the light rail "is a big step in the right direction" and "it's kind of nice to be here and feel like getting rail to Katy might happen." Others were critical. "They should have made this an elevated monorail," David Peak of northwest Harris County said while his train moved slowly on Fannin through the Texas Medical Center. "Isn't this why they did away with the trolleys to begin with?" DeLibero, however, has said elevating the rails would have cost too much and boasted Thursday that no city in the world has such beautiful trains. David Crossley, who promotes urban density as director of the Gulf Coast Institute, said Houstonians finally have a choice to live a big-city lifestyle without a car. "I don't know if people get how monumental this is," he said. "It lets people who have been sort of wanting that lifestyle for a long, long time to think about having it." John Sedlak, a Metro vice president who oversaw the line's construction, said the trains "are going to bring people to public transit that have never used it before." During an hourlong ceremony on a university plaza overlooking Buffalo Bayou and a fog-shrouded downtown skyline, members of Congress renewed their pledge to obtain federal matching funds for future rail lines, which voters approved in November. Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchison, R-Texas, recalled helping create Metro when she served as a representative from Houston in the state Legislature in the 1970s. "Today is the culmination of a dream and a great new beginning for Houston," she said. "It will change the face of Houston. It will increase commerce, increase our numbers of visitors, our conventions, our sporting events. It is turning a page and a beginning that we will all remember." ...RIDING THE TRAIN Trains run 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. today through Sunday. Trains will come every 12 to 15 minutes. Rides are free through Sunday. To ease crowding, passengers will be allowed to ride in one direction only. At the end of the line, exit the train and board a free Metro bus back to your starting point or get in line to ride the train again. Free parking at Reliant Park's Orange Lot; enter at Fannin and Naomi. \$2 parking at Fannin South Park & Ride lot. Metered parking on downtown streets.

Houston Chronicle**Date:** January 2, 2004**Page:** 1

Copyright 2004 Houston Chronicle