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# Public Transit - New Metro rail line to provide options - Northside extension brings residential, business possibilities

By Syd Kearney December 20, 2013 Publication: Houston Chronicle (TX) Page: 1 Word Count: 1234

When the new northern extension of Metro's Red Line begins service on Saturday, it will provide a window to a neighborhood that many Houstonians have never explored.

The North/Red Line, an extension of Metro's original route, connects the University of Houston-Downtown and Northline Commons, which is located just north of Crosstimbers. The 5.3-mile extension runs along Main and Fulton streets and cost \$756 million, making the entire Red Line nearly 13 miles.

The opening of the first new rail line in 10 years is going to bring "positive changes for the community," interim Metro president Tom Lambert said.

As the first to serve residential neighborhoods, the line will allow Metro "to see how we can use a bus system to feed into rail. And it will give people more transportation options."

Transportation options are just the beginning. It also opens up new residential possibilities for residents who live nearby. Some are looking at the rail extension as a way to grow their businesses. For others, it will provide easier access to shopping and dining on Houston's near northside.

"We anticipate an increasing number of shoppers using the rail to get to our stores, especially those shoppers who depend on the public transportation," said Jeff Procell, general manager for Northline Commons Mall.

The open-air mall is at the Red Line's northernmost terminus, the Northline Transit Center.

The transit center was part of a nearly 20-year-old negotiation between Metro and the mall's owners.

"We did that deal in the mid-'90s. Lucky us for having the foresight to make certain the rail would stop here," Procell said.

Procell points out that while there are many small strip shops along the Red Line, Northline Commons will be the only major retail center on any of the rail lines. He said he foresees a day when a downtown worker will use the rail line to pick up supplies at Office Depot or do some lunchtime shopping at Walmart. The ride from the UH-Downtown stop to Northline Commons takes about 19 minutes.

Rebecca Reyna also sees the line as a boon for business. As executive director for the Greater Northside Management District, Reyna and her team recently have been conducting tours for developers and others interested in doing business in the neighborhood.

"I can tell you they're excited about the potential. And we're excited to have the opportunity to introduce Houston's Northside," Reyna said. "Most people have never explored the Northside. We have such great businesses - the best Mexican restaurants, cleaners and salons."

Saturday celebration

Saturday's grand opening party at Moody Park will offer Houstonians a taste of what the area has to offer.

Northside businesses and food vendors, including La Macro Rey Del Pollo, will have booths at the celebration.

"We're hoping the attention that the rail line brings will encourage Houstonians to come and visit our businesses," she said.

Staci Davis is more than familiar with the predominantly Hispanic neighborhoods that the rail line serves. She operated her Radical Eats restaurant on Fulton from 2011 until this past August, when she moved the eatery, and her home, to Montrose. She lived in the Northside area for about 10 years.

"I just looked into the future and said this is going to take five years," Davis said, explaining one reason for moving her restaurant.

"They're not building more land inside the Loop," she said. "Now's the time to buy (on the Northside). The hipsters are just beginning to discover it. Once they learn they can buy cheaply, and then take the train to school, to work, to party, then it's going to be on."

She calls her former neighbors "cool people."

"It was a great neighborhood to live in. People look out for one another. And they're extremely nice," Davis said. "I wish I could have stayed."

Davis adds that she is keeping an eye on the neighborhood for a future business opportunity.

Close-in appeal

Realtor Tim Surratt, with Greenwood King Properties, said interest in Northside homes started picking up last year.

"It's one of the last affordable close-in neighborhoods," Surratt noted, adding that it has a lot of appeal for young, first-time home buyers.

The draw is the affordability of the housing, but "they're really excited about the rail," Surratt said. "These young people just aren't as interested in driving. They want to use public transportation."

So far this year, sales of 80 homes in Northside neighborhoods such as Lindale, Irvington and Ryan have been closed. If the 18 homes currently under contract close, it will mean an increase of 38 percent in home sales over last year.

Surratt also is impressed by the escalation in home prices. In 2012, the most expensive sale was \$181,000. This year, one Northside home went for \$371,000.

Surratt won't credit rail for that jump - "an improving economy certainly has helped sales" - but he does think the rail line has made people much more comfortable investing in the neighborhood.

Metro's Lambert acknowledges that the construction of the rail's extension line has been painful for some businesses.

"The community has been very patient," he said. Some businesses, including Radical Eats and the original Doneraki's, didn't make it through the build-out.

In assessing what the line could mean for the future of Northside, Lambert points to retail, restaurant and residential successes along the Main Street line.

Prediction of success

Thomas Escalente, the owner of Sig's Lagoon in Midtown, has a little advice for entrepreneurs looking for opportunities along the new line. Escalente opened his vinyl record store in 2005, just 13 months after the first Metro Rail line debuted.

"I knew it was the future," he said of rail in Houston.

Sig's is located in a cluster of businesses, including the Continental Club and Taco A Go-Go, that make the 3600 and 3700 blocks of Main a destination for young adults.

Escalente says business owners need to be picky and patient if they set up shop along the new rail line.

"You need to pick a location carefully. Look for other businesses that can help you grow. Then you just need to hold on, do whatever it takes to get by. The business will grow."

When Sig's first opened, it was a retail island going it alone in Midtown. Escalente eventually downsized his store, moving it around the corner in the summer of 2010 just as several other new businesses, including Natachee's Supper n' Punch and My Flaming Heart, were opening.

Escalente also would tell new Northside business owners to "market to the people who use the rail." There's no reason this new rail line shouldn't be a success, he suggested.

"For the first time, Houston will get a true glimpse of what daily life can be with rail transportation," Escalente said, adding that he's already scouting a bus route near his Oak Forest home that will feed into the new line and then whisk him to his Midtown business. "I could get so much done while I'm riding on the train."

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#### Grand opening

A free concert in Moody Park and free rides on the city's light rail line will celebrate the opening of the new 5.3-mile light rail line extension of the Red Line. Among the entertainers will be A.B. Quintanilla & Los Kumbia King All Starz and Mango Punch.

When: 11:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday

Where: 3725 Fulton

Information: [ridemetro.org](http://ridemetro.org)

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