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Long-awaited rail complete, but discussion hardly over

By Dug Begley May 18, 2015 Publication: Houston Chronicle (TX) Page: 1 Word Count: 1298

Free rides and concert

To celebrate the opening of the two new lines, all rail rides will be free Saturday. There also will be various community celebrations, finishing with a free concert at BBVA Compass Stadium accessible from both the new lines.

3-4:30 p.m.: Purple, Green, Downtown Lines inaugural rides and community celebrations.

5 p.m.: Community rally finale and fireworks.

5:30 p.m.: Concert begins with Ernest Walker Band, Zenteno Spirit, Mario Havikoro Dancers and Herman Charles Dancers.

7 p.m.: Frankie J.

8 p.m.: Ne-Yo.

8:45 p.m.: Fireworks finale.

Note: The concert is free, but tickets are required. For details, go to www.bbvacompassstadium.com/events/detail/metro-rail-fest

Learn what the truce between Metro and a local Congressman could mean for rail along Richmond at HoustonChronicle.com/richmondrail

Mel Upton had been hearing for years that Metro intended to put a train down Scott Street near his home. But his doubts mounted as time passed and nothing happened. When the construction crews finally came, he said, they "tore everything up."

It took a while, Upton admitted, but they put everything back together. Last Monday, as he waited for a bus two blocks north of the University of Houston campus, a train on a test run passed right by him down the middle of Scott Street.

He's waited six years to board that train for a ride to the central business district. Many people in Houston, meanwhile, are waiting to see if the two new rail lines opening Saturday were worth \$1.4 billion and a lot of political heartburn.

The Metropolitan Transit Authority, after numerous delays, will christen the Green and Purple lines Saturday with free rides and community celebrations, just in time for Memorial Day. The openings signify the end of a long, sometimes painful journey that tested nerves and frustrated supporters and opponents alike.

Officials are encouraged that the process has led to greater understanding of rail among supporters and opponents. Prospects for additional rail in Houston brightened late last week, meanwhile, with the announcement that Metro had reached an agreement with U.S. Rep. John Culberson, R-Houston, softening the language Culberson added to a transportation bill to block a long-planned line on Richmond that was part of the same 2003 referendum that led to the Green and Purple lines.

Completing construction is hardly the end of the discussion about rail and its place in Houston, however. How efficiently the new lines operate, and how well they serve the residents, students, workers and travelers looking for an alternative to driving, will determine whether the political fighting and price tag were worth it for Houston-area taxpayers and Metro riders.

Critics: 'danger train'

If riders flock to the lines, elected officials and transit board members agreed, it could wash away the stain of political infighting and many missteps - including a controversy over buying American rail car components that threatened hundreds of millions of federal dollars, a botched design of a signature downtown station, repeated delays and a failed attempt to build an underpass along Harrisburg that nearby residents preferred.

A lackluster rollout, weak community support and a rash of accidents as drivers adjust to the new trains could give currency to critics' predictions of a boondoggle "danger train." Metro officials acknowledge the opening is a huge opportunity for the agency, but they warn that nothing goes perfectly.

"There are going to be accidents," chairman Gilbert Garcia said. "But those in my view are not the litmus test. There are accidents on (U.S.) 59."

Rather than counting accidents or even simply counting riders in the early months, Garcia and others said they will measure the success of the new lines on whether people use them as an alternative to driving and whether they better connect people to more places. Connecting students at the University of Houston and Texas Southern University to downtown jobs and night life, for example, will demonstrate an important benefit, Metro CEO Tom Lambert said.

"We are really connecting neighborhoods," he said. "That is what the east end and southeast lines are. It is going to allow those students opportunities to travel they do not have today."

It wasn't easy. Residents and drivers endured construction delays and closings, and many businesses complained to Metro of lost sales tied to being cut off by construction. In the process of moving utilities, a power pole was reinstalled in the middle of a sidewalk ramp along Harrisburg. Workers replacing street signs along Scott Street hung two of them upside down.

The hiccups, large and small, pushed back the rail line opening from mid-2014 to December 2014 to April. Lambert in March conceded Metro would miss that mark as well, saying contractors didn't make the tracks available to Metro in time to do the necessary testing of equipment.

"We were committed to getting a good end product," Lambert said.

Some portions of the Green Line along Harrisburg remain a work in progress, even as Metro celebrates the opening. An overpass spanning the Union Pacific Railroad tracks - replacing an underpass Metro initially planned but scrapped because of contamination on the site - will not open until 2017.

Metro and city public works officials also are working to refine traffic- light timing downtown, where the trains have the potential to carry many riders but also throw off what is already a tangle of sequenced intersections.

"I am quite sure they will be constantly monitoring the situation," Houston Public Works spokesman Alvin Wright said, adding that signal timing around the trains is a work in progress beyond May 23. "We're going to be looking at those patterns and how they can be improved once they are up and running."

Despite the delays and missteps, Houstonians are excited about the new service, Garcia said.

"They want transit, and they are ready to try it," he said, saying one of the most frequent questions he and Metro staff get is when the lines will open.

Officials point to the extension of the Red Line, from the University of Houston Downtown to Northline Commons, as an indication of the demand. Since the 5.3-mile extension opened in December 2013, its ridership has exceeded expectations and continues to grow.

March light rail ridership was 12.5 percent higher than March 2014, while overall bus ridership dropped by 3 percent. Even accounting for bus lines the train replaced, rail is carrying more riders, and its expansion north has meant more people can make direct trips downtown and to the

Texas Medical Center.

Prestige over quality?

Skeptics, however, continue to question the cost. The Green Line, along Harrisburg, was fully funded by Metro, at a cost of \$587 million, not including the upcoming overpass work. The Purple Line, totaling \$823 million, was mostly paid for by \$450 million from the Federal Transit Administration.

Regardless of the source, the \$1.4 billion cost comes out to about \$158 million per mile, since the two lines share some track in the downtown area.

"How many buses would that add?" asked John Frederick, an Uptown-area resident and Metro critic, who said he would prefer Metro to focus on suburban commuters with park and ride buses or rail, rather than limited areas within Loop 610. Like others, Frederick said Metro's "toy train" is more about the perceived prestige of having rail than about delivering quality service.

Metro officials - most of whom were not with the agency when the rail line plan was developed - disagree. Expanding rail service will provide better transit, which in turn makes the entire bus and rail system more appealing, Garcia said. He predicted that over time, people will recognize that the rail lines were worth the money and controversy.

"It is going to work and people are going to say 'My goodness, why didn't we do this sooner?' " he said.

dug.begley@chron.com

twitter.com/DugBegley

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