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From the Los Angeles Times

Rail Riders Stay on Track Despite Drop in Gas Prices

Metrolink sets a record of almost 42,000 average weekday boardings even as auto fuel costs have tumbled. The agency is seeking more trains.

By Caitlin Liu

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Ridership on Southern California's commuter rail lines has defied conventional wisdom and climbed to an all-time high despite falling gas prices, with officials now on a global hunt for more trains.

Metrolink, which provides rail service from downtown Los Angeles to five surrounding counties, saw a jump in ridership when gas prices escalated this summer and fall. In the past, those numbers tended to even out as gas prices declined and some commuters went back to their cars.

But Metrolink officials said they have not seen that decline in 2005. Instead, 41,513 passengers boarded Metrolink trains on an average weekday last month, a 4% rise since September when prices peaked at pumps across California. (Gas prices topped off at \$3.05 a gallon in September, according to statewide averages, but have now tumbled to \$2.23.)

"We were expecting what everyone was expecting. But so far we've only gained ridership. So it must be more than just gas prices," said Denise Tyrrell, spokeswoman for Metrolink. "The 42,000 is a record. It's a new high."

Overall ridership on the commuter rail — which serves Los Angeles, Orange, Ventura, San Bernardino, Riverside and San Diego counties — jumped by 7% in November compared with the same month in 2004.

Some of Metrolink's biggest ridership gains occurred along lines to the Inland Empire, an area of rapid growth and increasing traffic congestion.

Ridership along the Inland Empire/Orange County Line averages 4,091 a day, a 12% increase since 2004. The line's tracks parallel the hyper-congested 91 Freeway, where beleaguered motorists inching along often look up to see trains whizzing by.

Metrolink's most popular route, the San Bernardino Line, grew 11% to 12,097 boardings a day, compared with last November.

Even the Ventura Line — which saw ridership drop earlier in 2005 after rain-flooded tracks temporarily shut down some service, and then a deadly derailment near Glendale scared more people away — has fully recovered. Last month, 4,099 passengers boarded the Ventura Line, exactly the same as a year ago.

"It's hard to find a seat now," said Roger Christensen, a board member of the Train Riders Assn. of California, who lives in Sherman Oaks and sometimes rides the Ventura Line. "The trains are full or full-ish. Sometimes you have to stand."

Metrolink ridership remains just a tiny fraction of all commuters. And transit experts said they don't expect that to change anytime soon despite the recent gains.

"In the U.S., gas prices are still relatively low. Household incomes are relatively high," said professor James E. Moore II, associate director of the National Center for Metropolitan Transportation Research at USC. "Gas prices have to go up a lot more" to make a significant number of people switch to mass transit.

Metrolink is winning loyalty from commuters who are tired of the stress and congestion of freeway driving.

That's certainly true for people like Anthony Ramirez and his girlfriend, Linda Ladage, who recently rode the commuter train for the first time.

The Apple Valley residents decided to ride the train to visit Olvera Street in downtown Los Angeles "just to avoid the traffic, all that hassle and bustle," said Ramirez, a 55-year-old retiree, as he and Ladage waited on a Union Station platform for their 5 p.m. train to come. "We wanted a very relaxing day. We figured the best way to do that is to leave the car in San Bernardino ... and let Metrolink take us to L.A."

Kathy Macchia, who has been riding Metrolink for five years, said she loathes driving because it takes her more time. Two weeks ago, the La Verne resident needed her car for an appointment, so she drove to her job as an administrative assistant at a law firm in downtown Los Angeles.

Driving the 210, the 605 and 10 freeways took her one hour and 45 minutes, she said, grimacing. "That was no fun."

She said her usual morning ride on Metrolink takes 45 minutes.

Facing increasingly crowded trains, Metrolink officials have been scouring the used-train market across the nation to boost Southern California's commuter rail fleet as quickly as possible, Tyrrell said. But other than leasing a dozen cars from a Seattle transit agency — which happened to have extra equipment — Metrolink has not had much luck finding other late-model, gently-used trains in good working condition to rent or buy outright.

So earlier this month, Metrolink — which has 39 locomotives and 151 cars — asked manufacturers worldwide to submit bids for 80 to 100 cars. Because commuter trains are custom-built, it could be 2 1/2 years before the new cars are in service.

Metrolink has asked that the cars be built to incorporate a new crash-management technology to make trains safer. The lead cab car will have reinforcements in the ceiling and floor, and the force during a serious crash will be distributed throughout the train.

To better protect passengers from frontal impact, all seats inside the lead cab also will face the rear of the train.

"We don't think our passengers will like [rear-facing seats], but the tests are all in, and it's proven to increase safety," Tyrrell said.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority's buses and rail lines also saw increased usage when gas prices spiked. But unlike Metrolink, the MTA's growth has leveled off.

Though total ridership on the county's bus, light-rail and subway system declined by 1% since September, MTA officials say it could be due to natural variation from their statistical sampling, which has a margin of error of plus or minus 7% from month to month on some lines. Metrolink counts every rider.

Since 2004, the MTA has seen ridership grow about 9% in buses and 11% in its trains.

"Up until a couple of months ago, gas prices were motivating people to use the bus. It seems our growth in ridership coincided fairly consistently," said Ed Muncy, the transit agency's director of service performance analysis. "When gas prices started to subside, we've seen that growth stop. But much of the ridership we got, we kept."

MTA officials credit improving service for the year-to-year ridership gains.

The agency now runs 15 Metro Rapid bus lines, a popular program with riders. In late October, the MTA opened the Orange Line busway in the San Fernando Valley, adding 16,400 daily boardings.

Officials also said it's difficult to gauge the MTA's historic ridership highs. Although buses had more riders in the 1980s, fares were unusually low. And the agency — then known as the Southern California Rapid Transit District — was running a lot more bus lines. Some routes have since been taken over by regional agencies such as Foothill Transit in the San Gabriel Valley.

A few years ago, the MTA also revamped the way it sampled rail passengers, which led to dramatic drops in some ridership estimates, said Marc Littman, a spokesman for the agency.

For example, in summer 2001, ridership on the Red Line was reported to exceed 140,000 a day. But a year later, using the new sampling method, estimated daily subway ridership nosedived to less than 100,000.

Today, the Red Line has an estimated ridership of 118,100, up about 8% from a year ago, according to the MTA.

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