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Busway so popular, it's nearing capacity

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High gas prices spurred Orange Line ridership to nearly 22,000 daily riders in May - achieving in just seven months a level the MTA had anticipated would take 15 years to reach, officials said Friday.

Gas prices averaged about \$3.37 a gallon last month, which officials said helped boost ridership 15 percent to 21,878 riders a day.

"It's a huge jump and it's a tremendous vote of confidence for the Orange Line," said county Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, an MTA board member and early champion of the San Fernando Valley busway. "I never would have believed we could be this far along this fast."

But with such momentum, he believes that these ridership numbers can be sustained.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority launched the \$350 million line in late October, a dedicated bus lane that runs 14 miles between North Hollywood and Warner Center. At the time, officials predicted it would take more than 15 years to reach 22,000 daily passengers.

MTA planners had estimated that the Orange Line would attract 5,000 to 7,000 daily riders its first year, an estimate considered low by many experts.

But by March, the agency counted more than 18,000 daily boardings. The line - once fiercely opposed by neighbors who decried a busway cutting through their community - surpassed ridership on the \$898 million Gold Line from downtown to Pasadena.

"This is one of Metro's greatest success stories," said John Catoe, deputy CEO of the transit agency. "Commuters have discovered that the Metro Orange Line is a real viable alternative for meeting the high price of gas and traveling throughout the Valley and beyond,"

Like most transit agencies, the MTA counts every time a passenger boards the line, regardless of whether it is for a one-way or round trip.

"The concern I have is that we are now rapidly approaching the engineered capacity of the line. We didn't expect to be near this ridership," said Kymberleigh Richards, a transit activist who chairs the MTA's San Fernando Valley governance council. "We are going to have to look at increasing capacity. There is a limit to how much capacity a bus-based system can have."

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