Orange Line could boost Valley business
By Christina Villacorte, Staff Writer LA Daily News

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When Lorena Ramirez of West Hills decided her business needed a new location, she grabbed a spot right next to the soon-to-open Orange Line busway extension.

Six months after moving to a strip mall within walking distance of the Sherman Way station, Elite Full Service Salon's walk-in customers have grown from one a week at her old site to eight a week now.

Ramirez hopes when the Orange Line begins carrying thousands of people through the area starting Saturday, her hairstylists and manicurists will become even busier.

"That would be amazing," the 36-year-old resident of West Hills said. "That would be awesome."

The four-mile busway extension, opening next weekend, will run from Canoga Park to Chatsworth and its ridership is expected to grow to 9,000 passengers per day by 2020, though Metro hasn't provided estimates of its first-year ridership.

In addition to the impact on local traffic, business experts believe the busway extension will add jobs to the San Fernando Valley and boost the customer base for businesses located along its route.

"I think we're going to see dramatic impact right away," predicted Stuart Waldman, president of the Valley Industry and Commerce Association.

The original Orange Line beat ridership expectations from the first week, Waldman said, "And we expect this will happen with the extension as well.

"That's tens of thousands of people taking trips daily who are going to be looking for places to grab a bite to eat, get groceries, take their dry cleaning, retailers."

The extension has already become an engine of job creation, just by getting built.

It cost $154 million to construct - almost $62 million under budget - and was completed ahead of schedule.

A study by the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation estimated the extension has already produced between 2,000 and 3,000 jobs, from construction jobs to employment supported by those workers' wages.

Metropolitan Transportation Authority spokesman Dave Sotero hopes once buses are up and running, the economic impact will be multiplied.

"We've already witnessed the slow and steady transformation of a region as a result of transit coming into the area, and with this, we're creating more opportunities for people to move."

Proprietors of stores, restaurants and other establishments along the extension are already taking steps to turn
passengers into customers.

Gamela Grill, a restaurant serving authentic Brazilian food, happens to be sandwiched between Canoga Avenue and the busway.

Its owner, Anna Paula Sizemore, said, "We're going to put a sign in the rear of the store to make us visible to the people who are passing by on the buses, and also the people who are jogging, walking or pushing strollers on the path next to the busway."

Ramirez, meanwhile, is offering special deals at her salon.

Unlike them, Steve Sales doesn't expect the busway to boost his business, Steve's Jaguar Service, which specializes in fixing luxury automobiles and sports cars.

Still, he and his existing clients appreciate how the busway has given the neighborhood a tune-up.

"It's nice to see the area cleaned up," he said. "This all used to be just dirt, which would get into my shop. Now, it's all developed so there's no dirt, no burns - it's just better."

Professor Marlon Boarnet, director of graduate programs in urban planning and development at the University of Southern California, believes the extension, and the other transit and highway projects being built now thanks to Measure R, could have a profound effect on the region.

"The Orange Line extension is important but is only part of a larger network of projects," Boarnet said in an email. "I think expecting quick economic impacts from any one project obscures the larger benefit: Improving the transportation system is helpful for Los Angeles' economy.

"Over the long term, better transportation access can help spur economic activity by expanding the pool of persons whom firms can hire (literally by expanding the geographic area from which firms might hire) and hence leading to better matches between employees and jobs," he added.

But Bart Reed, executive director of The Transit Coalition, said the extension has an "Achilles' heel" that will stunt its economic impact.

"There's no concomitant increase in local bus service and rail service," he noted.

"If there was an increase in Metrolink service to Chatsworth, and an increase in local bus service on streets like Roscoe, Victory, Nordhoff, Devonshire, Sherman Way and Victory - including late night and early morning service - there would be more of an economic impact because people can travel that last mile to their jobs and their homes."

Reed is also calling for, among others, a portal that would connect the Red and Orange Line platforms at North Hollywood (right now, passengers transferring from one line to another have to cross busy Lankershim Boulevard), new stations at White Oak Avenue and Saticoy Street, and FlyAway bus connections to LAX.

Someday, he wants the Orange Line to stretch three more miles to Bob Hope Airport.

At present, ridership on the original Orange Line fluctuates between 25,000 to 27,000 a day.
Count babysitters Mary and Stephanie Duran among those who will use it even more with the extension.

The two teen sisters have been using the original Orange Line, as well as the Red Line subway, this summer to take their 3- and 5- year old wards on adventures to places like Universal CityWalk, Union Station and Hollywood. Now they plan to use the busway extension to head out to Stoney Point Park in Chatsworth.

"I would go all the way (to Chatsworth) to check it out," said Mary Duran, 16.

For Rosie Dunlap, the extension would make commuting between her home and her job much easier.

Right now, she leaves her home near downtown Los Angeles around 10 a.m. and has to take several buses and the Red Line subway to arrive at her job in Chatsworth by 1 p.m.

"It's an ordeal just to go to work," Dunlap said. "This extension will save me a lot of time."

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