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From the *Los Angeles Times*

## Metrolink growth strains station parking capacity

A ridership surge has already jammed lots, and the Orange County line's planned expansion will soon make it even harder to find a spot.

By David Reyes

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Until recently, Blaine Bridenball's morning involved a well-practiced routine: Get up, eat and drive to the Metrolink station in Buena Park by 7:15 for his commute to Los Angeles.

Then gas prices skyrocketed, and Bridenball found that the parking lot at the new train station was filling to capacity earlier and earlier.

"With each month it seems you add another five minutes," he said. "Now, the lot is full by 6:50 a.m."

This week, Bridenball joined hundreds of transit riders who have been boarding a shuttle bus at a nearby park for a two-mile ride to the train station -- a stopgap solution to a growing problem.

A surge in Metrolink ridership and plans to sharply increase the number of trains running on weekdays are forcing transportation planners to speed up projects to add parking at Orange County's train stations.

Until recently, 300 parking spaces were required at newly built stations.

"We believed that would be sufficient for many years," said Darrell Johnson, Orange County Transportation Authority commuter rail manager.

"The new standard we're now demanding is 500 spaces."

That standard will be used when the county's 12th Metrolink station, in Placentia, is built in three years.

Meantime, by 2010 officials hope to have trains running every 30 minutes from 5 a.m. to midnight on weekdays between Fullerton and Laguna Niguel.

Seven locomotives and 59 passenger cars are on order, new track has been laid, and additional parking must be either finished or near completion when the expanded service begins, officials say.

Until that happens, cities have been scrambling to set up shuttle services from Metrolink stations to residential areas, major employers, resort areas and shopping malls.

Nowhere is the increased demand for parking more evident than in Buena Park.

Its station opened 10 months ago, and unexpectedly high ridership has already forced OCTA and the city to spend \$220,000 on shuttle services for a year.

Plans for more parking are in the works.

"This shuttle is a good idea," said Felix Mendez, 30, of Garden Grove. "The station is closer to my home, but with the parking problem I would have to take the train at Fullerton, and that's in the opposite direction of where I need to go."

In Laguna Niguel, OCTA just acquired two acres where the California Department of Transportation plans to close a maintenance yard in two years. Taking its place will be 150 parking spaces.

In Fullerton, the county's busiest station, the lots fill up fast. The city and OCTA are working to build a 1,000-space parking garage at the site of a former citrus packing company nearby.

Down the line in Tustin, OCTA is about to move forward on a planned parking garage with 825 spaces.

In Irvine, valets were hired to wedge cars into its Metrolink lot. The practice ended when customers decided it was cheaper to park their own cars.

Now, OCTA and the city are spending \$27 million for a four-story, 1,500-space parking structure that is to open by September.

"With the anticipated upgrade in train service by OCTA in two years, this new facility will meet the increased demand," said Louie Gonzalez, an Irvine city spokesman.

But immediately, the Irvine project will make the daily commute a bit easier for people like Andrew Silber, 37, of Rancho Bernardo,

About a year ago, he paid \$2,500 for "a beater" -- a car he keeps parked at the packed Irvine station.

He drives it a few miles back and forth to his office, where he is a partner in a video game company.

"I did it to avoid 2 1/2 hours on the freeway," he said. "When I'm on the train, I can get work done, rest, and catch up on things. There's less stress."

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