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Steady stream of riders inaugurates MetroLink

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ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Monday, Aug. 28 2006

A steady stream of commuters boarded MetroLink trains all along the light-rail system's eight-mile Shrewsbury line this morning, but the big crowds that had packed trains and platforms over the weekend avoided the new extension on its first real day of operation.

The \$678 million extension opened to the public Saturday afternoon, and Metro offered free rides all weekend along the new line. But today, the first day riders must pay to board trains at the nine new stations, an army of Metro employees helped direct commuters and explain the scores of changes to bus schedules that also took effect today.

Dianne Williams, a spokeswoman for the transit agency, said today that there were no reported problems with the trains or new stations and that commuters seem to be adjusting to the new bus routes and schedules.

Solana Rice, who lives in St. Louis' Tower Grove South neighborhood, boarded a train at the Shrewsbury station on her commute to her job as a planner with St. Louis County government. She said she usually drives to work, but won't any more.

"I've been counting down the days until today," said Rice, 26. "I used MetroLink in the past to get to the airport, but other than that it just wasn't functional for me. Now, I'm going to use it every day."

Victoria Stanley, the volunteer director for Nurses for Newborns, said she's going to be doing the same thing — just in the opposite direction.

Stanley used to be in the car for about 45 minutes driving from her home in the Emerson Park area of East St. Louis to Nurses for Newborns, which is located right next to the Shrewsbury stop on Landsdowne Avenue near River Des Peres Boulevard. The train takes about the same time, but "there's a lot more peace of mind not being in traffic and a lot less gas I'll need to buy," she said.

Stanley said she used to take MetroLink to Rams games or for shopping trips to Union Station, but was never a regular passenger before.

Thomas Shrout Jr., executive director of Citizens for Modern Transit, said he expects the new extension will lead to a big increase in new transit users like Rice and Stanley. But Shrout, who was surveying the morning rush at the Shrewsbury station, said the new line's biggest benefit might be measured in economic development.

"We shouldn't just look at what happens today, but what happens in 10 or 20 years," Shrout said. "There's going to be redevelopment up and down this corridor."

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