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Commuters embrace new MetroLink options

By **Tim O'Neil**

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William Orrick saved 25 minutes getting to his telecom job at Washington University. Investment banker Tom Vespa reached Clayton in six minutes. Student Ryan Lynch found a less hectic route to the University of Missouri at St. Louis.

They were among the thousands of MetroLink rail riders whose choices for commuting got better with the opening Monday of eight new miles of track. MetroLink has always offered a smooth train ride since it opened in 1993. What it lacked was variety of destination.

The expanded line remains far from the dreamers' hopes of a big-city rail system. But it does offer new advantages.

Here are a few of the expanded system's options:

Heading north and east from the new Shrewsbury stop

The new line means shorter commutes for many riders.

Orrick, of House Springs, used to take a bus downtown and pick up MetroLink at Union Station to head to Washington University. The Shrewsbury station amounts to a 25-minute cutoff, with a train ride of only 15 minutes.

Lynch, an UMSL senior, used to hunt for a parking near the Forest Park-DeBaliviere station and board the train there. On Monday, he parked in the lot at Shrewsbury, switched trains at Forest Park-DeBaliviere and got to school in an hour from his home in south St. Louis. He said it took a little longer, but was less hectic, than his old way.

The new line is tailor-made for Gentry Smith, an assistant county prosecutor. He lives two blocks from the Shrewsbury station and works in the Clayton courthouse. His commute was "a very pleasant 12 minutes. The same ride is 25 minutes by car, at least."

From downtown to downtown

The most logical improvement is direct train service from downtown St. Louis to downtown Clayton. It's a 25-minute ride, and the Clayton station is only a two-block walk to the St. Louis County Courthouse. A motorist can't beat that by much, and would still have to find parking.

Vespa, the investment banker, lives near Skinker Boulevard and Forest Park Parkway and works in Clayton. Back when MetroLink began planning for the Clayton extension, he was among those who had opposed building it above ground. He approves of the tunnel from Washington University to Hanley Road in Clayton.

"We were a little hard on them in the beginning, but they did a great job," Vespa said. "It's about perfect. And I can't believe I'm standing here in St. Louis. I used to travel this way in Chicago."

From Shrewsbury to UMSL or Lambert

The MetroLink always has been popular with UMSL students, whose campus is served by two stations. Lynch's train time from Shrewsbury was about 35 minutes, not counting a wait of as much as 10 minutes to change trains at Forest Park-DeBaliviere. For air travelers, the final stretch from UMSL to Lambert is 10 minutes more.

Heading to the airport from Shrewsbury or Clayton requires a switch to the Lambert westbound train, which uses the same track as the westbound Shrewsbury train. It's prudent to check the train's destination before boarding..

ESPN technician Michael Zadroga, who worked the Sunday night Cardinals-Cubs game, complimented MetroLink en route to Lambert. A patron of the New York subway system, Zadroga called MetroLink "clean, efficient and very civilized. I just wish it had more room for luggage."

Shopping at the Galleria

Dave Watson and Janet Moate, two public works officials from Niagara Falls, Ontario, who are here for a convention, took the Shrewsbury train from downtown to the big mall. They got off at the Richmond Heights station and took the seven-minute walk under Interstate 170, across Brentwood Boulevard and through the parking lot to the Galleria.

The walk is made more challenging by the steady street traffic heading up the northbound I-170 ramp. The five-second "walk" signal across the ramp doesn't help much.

"The walk could be more user-friendly," Watson said.

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