

(July 30, 2008) Southtown Star: Metra Looking Out for the Southland

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Phil Kadner column

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Commuter trains may eventually run on weekends from Chicago to Orland Park and New Lenox.

This is the best news southwest suburban Metra riders have received since they were told they would no longer have to pee in soda cans.

Back in 2002, the Metra Electric Line - which runs out to University Park through Riverdale, Homewood and Olympia Fields - was running trains without washrooms.

It was the only commuter train on the Metra network so ill-equipped. When commuters complained, the grand poohbah of Metra at the time, Jeffrey Ladd, said he wasn't running a "social welfare agency" designed to give people access to jobs or toilets.

Ladd then announced a multibillion-dollar plan to create a new Metra line in the western suburbs, where he happened to live.

Well, things have gotten better since Ladd's departure from the agency, and Monday's announcement, apparently the result of pressure from local mayors and U.S. Rep. Dan Lipinski (D-3rd), is a day that will long be remembered.

Metra agreed to run weekend commuter trains on its SouthWest Service Line, which operates from Union Station in Chicago to Manhattan with stops in Oak Lawn, Palos Heights, Palos Park, Orland Park and New Lenox, among others.

Well, there won't exactly be full weekend service. After all, this isn't Oak Brook or Oak Park we're talking about.

Metra will "test the waters" by launching a few commuter runs on Saturdays, maybe by February of next year, to see if there's enough demand to make the service permanent. There are no immediate plans for Sunday service.

"I was very happy with the meeting," Lipinski said afterward.

"You never know that it's definitely going to happen," the congressman continued, sounding a proper cautionary tone, "but it looks very good."

I couldn't help wondering if anyone had asked Metra executives if southwest suburban commuters would be allowed to ride inside the cars or be forced to ride the tops of the trains, like the Untouchables of India.

Metra executives seem to look at the Southland as if it is a Third World nation.

A quick check of the Metra schedule in Naperville indicates that suburb has about 14 commuter trains running on Saturdays and 9 on Sundays.

I realize Orland Park isn't Naperville. But it is one of the 100 most wonderful places to live in America, according to Money Magazine.

Metra executives in the past have been quick to say they're just catering to demand, and demand for train service is higher in the northwest and western suburbs.

But it's difficult to measure demand for bus service, for example, if you're not running buses.

Suburbanites are a stubborn people and simply refuse to wait at train stations for trains that will never come.

Even if train schedules aren't convenient (say you often have to leave work after 6:30 p.m., and trains aren't running on a

regular basis at night), you may opt to take a car to work.

That too has been a problem on many south suburban commuter lines in the past.

Orland Park's neighbor, Tinley Park, has the busiest station on Metra's Rock Island Line. Yet the station at 80th Avenue doesn't have a washroom.

Metra recently promised to update the station and actually elevate the platform to train level so commuters no longer have to jump onto and off the commuter cars.

See, the good news just keeps on coming.

Although, as Lipinski suggested, you never know what's actually going to happen.

The Metra Electric Line, the one without washrooms on the cars, also had turnstiles in the train stations.

No one could explain why the turnstiles, which were often broken, were necessary on that one line in the entire Metra network.

Eventually, they were removed, but only after Metra tried fixing and then replacing them.

Now, Orland Park (one of the wealthiest suburbs in South Cook County) and New Lenox, (one of the fastest-growing suburbs in the state) may finally get weekend train service.

One of the problems with scheduling such service, apparently, is that freight trains share the Norfolk Southern tracks, and railroads apparently run more freight trains on weekends than weekdays.

When I heard that, I could see how things have improved since Ladd left Metra in 2006.

No one from the commuter agency suggested that Orland Park commuters ride in the cattle cars.