
(July 28, 2008) Chicago Tribune: SouthWest Service Line could add Saturday transit

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from city to Will County by February

Saturday transit on SouthWest Service Line is in the works
By Richard Wronski | Chicago Tribune reporter
http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/local/chicago/chi-southwest-metra_both_29jul29,0,2440220.story

Metra trains could be running Saturdays on the SouthWest Service Line by early next year, providing a long-awaited commuting option for thousands of residents in Chicago and in booming Will County, officials said Monday.

Two or three round-trip trains would operate under a proposed one-year demonstration project that U.S. Rep. Dan Lipinski (D-Ill.) called a "first step" toward full weekend service.

"With the high cost of gasoline, the cries for weekend service have gotten greater," Lipinski said.

Details of the plan are to be worked out by Oct. 1 between Metra, the Regional Transportation Authority and freight railroads, officials said. The earliest that Saturday trains could be running is February.

The SouthWest line primarily serves Chicago's Southwest Side and suburbs from Oak Lawn to Will County.

The line carries about 9,000 riders each weekday, or about 2.4 million passenger trips per year.

As with other mass-transit service, the line's ridership is surging, up 7.9 percent in the first quarter of 2008 versus the same period in 2007.

SouthWest Service was expanded in January 2006 to the Will County towns of New Lenox and Manhattan. Will County added 171,000 residents since 2000, the biggest increase of any Illinois county.

Plans for the expanded service were discussed by transportation officials and local leaders at a meeting convened Monday by Lipinski at Toyota Park in Bridgeview.

The SouthWest line is one of three Metra lines that do not offer any weekend service. The others are North Central Service to Antioch and the Heritage Corridor to Joliet.

The cost of operating the new service has not been determined, but officials said operating money likely would come from a so-called innovation fund set up by RTA legislation the state legislature approved in January.

A key obstacle to more service on the SouthWest line-and the source of many delays over the years-has been the heavy volume of freight traffic on intersecting tracks.

Adding Saturday trains would require the cooperation of freight railroads, which previously moved some trains to weekends to accommodate more weekday passenger trains.

Officials agreed to work out a way to accommodate the freight schedule.

"That's the challenge," said James Dodge, a Metra board member and Orland Park trustee who attended Monday's meeting.

"We need to balance the need for more transit with the realities of freight traffic."

Orland Park Mayor Dan McLaughlin said officials have been lobbying Metra for years to add the weekend service.

Three train stations, the third of which was completed last year, sit along the SouthWest line in the village of 60,000 residents.

The new service would boost the fortunes of the village's transit-oriented Main Street Triangle development, where more than 200 town residences and additional retail space are planned, McLaughlin said.

"It will be a great benefit for people and the region," he said.

"We have a lot of people who work downtown, and I'm sure they will appreciate it."