

(October 24, 2008) Chicago Tribune: Metra adding Saturday service to SouthWest line in March

Service along Metra's SouthWest route will extend into Saturdays beginning in March, thanks to a \$680,000 grant from the commuter railroad and the Regional Transportation Authority.

U.S. Rep. Dan Lipinski (D-Ill.) joined community leaders from around the southwest suburbs in Chicago Ridge on Thursday to unveil the two-year project. Metra plans to offer six trips on Saturdays, whisking passengers along the route to and from Union Station in Chicago. Trains will run in the morning and evening, but the specific schedules have yet to be worked out, said Phil Pagano, Metra's executive director.

Metra's investment in weekend service is significant, Pagano said, because it underscores how rapidly Chicago's suburbs are growing. In 1983, there were only three commuter trains for the SouthWest route, which includes stops on Chicago's Southwest Side, Oak Lawn, Chicago Ridge, Orland Park, and, ultimately, Manhattan. Today, there are 30 trains serving that region, Pagano said.

"There is growing demand for transit in the suburbs," said Steve Schlickman, executive director of the RTA. "I'm confident that this project will be a tremendous success."

One reason the train schedules are not finalized, Lipinski said, is that transit officials are working with freight haulers to ease congestion on that rail line. Increasing commuter trains will not reduce the number of freight carriers, but it may change when they run, said Lipinski, a member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

The grant money will pay for weekend service for a year, Pagano said, but officials want to test the program for two years. If Saturday service becomes popular, Pagano said the program could extend to Sunday.

"Many residents in my district have viewed weekend trains on this line only as a dream," Lipinski said. "I have no doubt that if you run it, [the people] will come."