

(October 18, 2008) Southtown Star: Metra to make improvements in Southland

Metra will forge ahead with plans to build a U.S. Cellular Field stop, rebuild Tinley Park's 80th Avenue station and add weekend trains to the SouthWest Service Line.

And the commuter rail agency will do it without raising fares next year.

The extra stations and service were included in a 2009 budget released Friday. The Metra board will vote on the \$632 million spending plan next month.

The immediate benefit for south suburban riders will be the February debut of weekend trains on the SouthWest Service Line, the Chicago-to-Manhattan route that stops in Oak Lawn, Chicago Ridge, Worth, Palos Heights, Palos Park, Orland Park and New Lenox.

Metra initially will run three trains inbound and outbound on Saturdays. Metra and the Regional Transportation Authority will chip in about \$350,000 each to pay for the service.

Metra long insisted heavy freight traffic made adding weekend trains impossible on the line. But room for commuter service was found after U.S. Rep. Dan Lipinski (D-3rd), of Western Springs, met this summer with Norfolk Southern, the railroad that owns the tracks.

If the trains are popular, a Sunday schedule will be added, Lipinski said. But he added that the Saturday service will go away if not enough people ride it.

"It is going to be a test to see if the ridership is there," Lipinski said. "I certainly have heard from enough people that the interest is there."

Metra is planning to set aside \$22.5 million next year for stations - good enough to start construction on the Rock Island District Lines's new 35th Street stop next to U.S. Cellular Field.

Farther south on the Rock in Tinley Park, Metra is promising to come through on its \$5 million commitment to overhaul the squat, brown station at 80th Avenue.

The new facility likely will open in 2010.

Unlike the Chicago Transit Authority and Pace, Metra is not proposing to raise fares.

A 10 percent fare hike and an increase in the regional sales tax earlier this year should avoid any fare increases the next two years to pay for day-to-day operations, Metra chief Phil Pagano said.

But the General Assembly and Gov. Rod Blagojevich need to come through with a new infrastructure program to help pay for system expansions and additional cars, including 160 new Electric Line cars.

The state's last capital program, Illinois FIRST, expired in 2004.

Metra is on pace to provide a record 87 million passenger trips in 2008.

If the state doesn't come through with more money, riders will see more unreliable service, packed trains and system breakdowns, Pagano said.

"We will reassess how we have to operate," he said. " It is not going to be a pretty picture."