

(October 31, 2008) SW News Hearld: Lipinski Backs Metra Service On Weekends

By DERMOT CONNOLLY

Following prompting from Cong. Dan Lipinski (D-3rd), limited weekend service will begin next spring on the SouthWest Metra line that includes Wrightwood and Ashburn among the dozen stops between Union Station downtown and Manhattan in Will County.

Lipinski announced the addition of Saturday service at an Oct. 23 press conference he held with area mayors and officials from the RTA and Metra in the Chicago Ridge Metra station, the first station built on the line that began weekday service in the 1980s.

"Many residents in my district have viewed weekend service on this line as a dream. In the early spring, it will become a reality," said Lipinski.

Metra executive director Phil Pagano said the weekend service will begin as a pilot program in late March of 2009, offering three outbound morning trains, and three trains returning from Manhattan in the early afternoon and evening.

"We don't want to start it in the middle of winter," said Pagano.

Ashburn resident Noreen Kruse, who uses the SouthWest line to commute to her job downtown, said she would take advantage of the weekend service as well.

"It is definitely needed. There have been a few times something has been going on downtown on weekends that I would like to see, or take my children to, and the thought of having to find parking has stopped me.

"And just listening to people on the train platform, many people feel the same way," said Kruse, who lives within walking distance of the Metra station.

"It is only going to be limited service, but it is a start. We were on limited service during the week at the beginning too, but the people living in the towns on down the line proved that we needed it,' she said, noting that the last train doesn't leave Union Station now until after 11:30 p.m.

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The pilot program is expected to last two years before a review of ridership is done to see if it can be self-sustaining. MTA and RTA are each contributing \$340,000 grants to cover the \$680,000 needed for the first year.

The new service grew out of a meeting Lipinski convened in July with area mayors, Pagano, Steve Schlickman, executive director of the RTA - who was at the press conference also - and officials from freight railroads such as Norfolk Southern Corp., which leases the tracks to Metra and RTA for the SouthWest service.

With the rising cost of fuel causing hardship on motorists, Lipinski and the others agreed that weekend train service is needed.

"I'm very proud of the freight railroads that made this possible by re-arranging their schedules," said Lipinski, noting that other railroads that cross the tracks also had to be consulted.

"It's going to be good for the whole area. All of us mayors really wanted this for a long time," said Chicago Ridge Mayor Gene Siegel.

Pagano said that the pilot program will include three outbound trains each morning from Union Station and three inbound afternoon and evening trains from Manhattan.

The trains will make stops in Wrightwood and Ashburn, as well as Oak Lawn, Chicago Ridge, Worth, Palos Heights, Palos Park, Orland Park, New Lenox and Manhattan.

"Our little town is going rather quickly," said Manhattan Mayor Bill Borgo. "This will help a lot," he added, noting that Manhattan only has 7,000 residents now, but is growing fast.

"It will help the towns along the line. There are destinations along this line that will be helped with this service," said the congressman, pointing to the Oak Lawn Children's Museum opening right next to the train station.

"We have come a long way since Metra started on this line when we had only four weekday trains. We have 30 trains running now," Pagano said.

Lipinski said he fully expects weekend ridership to reflect what he has been hearing from constituents who have been calling for it.

"I always believed that if you run the trains, they (the passengers) will come. The thing we have to do now is get the word out about it being available," said Lipinski.

"I've heard from a lot of people who are looking forward to this. Coming up with the funding needed to continue this will certainly be a priority for me as we work on the federal transportation bill next year," said Lipinski, a member of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.