

### **MetroRail ridership rises in June**

*Preliminary numbers indicate daily passengers nearly double May's*

By LUCAS WALL

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MetroRail's average daily ridership grew to an estimated 26,000 in June as Houston's first light rail line completed six months of passenger service.

The preliminary June count, released Wednesday evening, represents almost twice as many riders as carried during an average weekday in May and the fifth straight monthly increase. Most of June's projected increase can be attributed to service changes effective May 30 that tied almost half of Metro bus routes into the rail line and curtailed certain routes to force bus riders onto the train.

Rail critics have characterized these riders as "bus refugees," claiming that Metro uses them to pump up its train ridership count even though they don't represent a net increase in transit use and thus don't reduce traffic congestion.

Some riders have complained the switch increased their travel times, but Metro says most have benefited.

"We're encouraged by the first six months, definitely," said Ken Connaughton, Metropolitan Transit Authority spokesman. "Ridership has been good, as you know, and we are at least cautiously optimistic that we may have made significant steps toward solving the safety problem."

The 7 1/2-mile Main Street light rail line has been plagued by collisions since it was completed Oct. 22 and opened for testing.

In the first three months of passenger operations, which began Jan. 1, there were 26 wrecks involving trains and vehicles or pedestrians. That number fell to 16 in the second quarter as the transit authority adjusted signals, signs, pavement markings and other items.

The problem has drawn national attention, including a story last week in the New York Times, and become the butt of local jokes. Metro's board of directors, responding to public concerns, last month directed its staff and consultants to rethink building future rail lines on streets. Planners are considering a subway for the downtown segment of the Southeast line, where construction is planned to start in 2007.

Metro's safety efforts continue. This week crews have been installing yellow "Approach With Caution" signs before six crash-prone intersections in Midtown, the Museum District and the Texas Medical Center.

"We are trying to diminish the number of accidents we have and striving to improve service to riders and build ridership," Connaughton said.

Metro is trying to lure more riders by improving the system. Most rail stations, only open for six months, already are being renovated to make ticket vending machines easier to use. Crews are turning the machines toward the inside of the platforms to reduce glare on the screens and to keep ticket buyers dry when it rains.

The change requires the removal of one seat from three-seat benches near the machines.

"We felt it was better to give up some seats on the platform in favor of better weather protection for the vending machines," Connaughton said.

Other issues linger. Metro has not scheduled a launch date for the "smart card" system, a method of paying fares with a special plastic card that had been scheduled to be available when the line opened.

Trains have no containers to hold copies of Metro's newsletter, which are available to bus passengers.

And a contractor still is working out bugs in electronic signs posted at each platform to advise riders of service disruptions or changes and to display an alert when trains are within one minute of the station.

The authority has set a goal of 35,000 daily boardings on the rail line by year's end.

Some statistics indicate that might be difficult to achieve, however. Use of the Fannin South Park & Ride lot, the only rail station where drivers can leave their cars in a Metro lot and hop aboard a train, has fluctuated. In June, an average 450 cars paid to park at the lot each weekday, about one-third of its capacity. For many commuters, the short length of the rail line makes it a tough sell to get off the South Loop, park and spend almost a half-hour on the rails to downtown.