

93,000 rode the light rail in Week 1

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Paying passengers boarded trains an estimated 93,000 times during the first week of Hiawatha light-rail service, topping expectations by almost 70 percent, Metro Transit reported Tuesday.

The goal is to average 55,400 rail rides each week through the end of the year.

While encouraged by the numbers for June 28 through July 4, officials were cautious.

"It is premature to project long-term ridership trends from the first seven days of operations," said Mark Fuhrmann, acting general manager of Metro Transit, operator of the line.

And Peter Bell, chairman of the Metropolitan Council, which oversees Metro Transit, said he was pleased with the numbers and the line's potential, but predicted: "At this time next year, we'll know if we have a successful system."

Meanwhile, a light-rail critic said the numbers need context.

Randal O'Toole, who is based in Oregon, said the figures don't mean anything until a complete review of bus ridership and vehicular traffic can be quantified for that week, too.

"It really doesn't do much good to have 93,000 rail riders if you have 93,000 less bus riders," O'Toole said. "Their estimates [for ridership by the end of the year] have always been very low. To say they've exceeded their amazingly low predictions doesn't tell you very much."

A look at bus service through the entire system showed no changes in ridership during the first three days of train service, said Bob Gibbons, director of customer services for Metro Transit.

By all accounts, Bell said, the first week of light-rail ridership met his original criteria for success: No major problems were reported, ridership numbers exceeded expectations, and passengers encountered easy-to-use ticket machines and clean, comfortable rail cars.

Still, some motorists were caught in lengthy delays trying to cross Hwy. 55, which parallels the rail line in south Minneapolis.

But Bell said "significant progress" has been made to ease traffic congestion by ensuring that traffic signals don't favor the trains and that the track arms do not block road access longer than necessary.

Baseball fans

It is not yet known who is riding the train where.

But Week One ridership probably was boosted by Minnesota Twins fans taking trains to three home games with the Chicago White Sox at the Metrodome, which is served by the Downtown East station at its front door.

Metro Transit officials estimated that the rail service provided a couple of thousand rides to each game.

"I think we were surprised at how well it went," said Matt Hoy, vice president of operations for the Twins.

Each train seemed to be carrying 25 to 70 people bound for the Dome, Hoy said. "I see it being nothing but a benefit to us and to the fans coming down here," he said. Metro Transit based its estimate on a sampling of 30 percent of the week's trips. To arrive at the number, staff members boarded the train at one end and counted each person who got on at every station.

Although ridership estimates exceeded Metro Transit's goal, O'Toole said the agency should be looking at ticket sales because the light-rail system operates largely on the honor system with fare checkers who can't ensure that every passenger bought a ticket. Bell said he is confident such systems have high compliance, adding that passengers without tickets will be fined \$200.

Revenue estimates for the first week are not yet available.

O'Toole also cited the rail line's \$715 million price as a burden and said ridership of new rail lines is typically high the first week of operation and then tapers off before increasing to its normal rate

"I would say the jury is still out" on how successful the [line] is," O'Toole said. "But I don't expect that [it] will carry enough people to justify it."

'Overdue'

Transit advocate Barb Thoman said she sees the ridership numbers as a positive sign. Thoman, program director of the Twin Cities advocacy group Transit for Livable Communities, noted that the line would only benefit in coming months as University of Minnesota students return to school and as service expands.

"These strong ridership numbers show just how overdue this region is for transit improvements," she said. "I was surprised by how strong it was in the first week of operation."

The next rail ridership figures will be reported in early August when Metro Transit will have estimates from the first month of service.

The first phase of the rail line links 12 stations along 8 miles between the downtown Minneapolis Warehouse District and Fort Snelling. The second, 4-mile section will open in December, adding service to the Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport and the Mall of America in Bloomington.