

FrontRunner ridership sags with economy, fuel cost

Commuter rail » Numbers 31% under UTA projections.

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The Salt Lake Tribune

Salt Lake Tribune

Updated:05/11/2009 07:37:55 AM MDT

Farmington » FrontRunner commuter trains are running 31 percent emptier than transit officials had projected when the line opened a year ago, and even lighter than when high gasoline prices drove waves of riders to the rails last summer.

Then again, highways are seeing less traffic as well in this struggling economy. Where critics see a waste of tax dollars, believers see a down cycle that will end with the recession.

"I noticed today that the parking lot wasn't as full as when [FrontRunner] started," Layton passenger Terry Smedley said last Thursday during his daily ride to Salt Lake City. It was roughly half empty. "But that might be because of gas prices. They'll be back."

For now, though, ridership is well off of last April's opening-day projections, and not just from the \$4.50-a-gallon gas days. The Utah Transit Authority still is tallying last month's numbers, but March drew 4,083 riders per weekday on the diesel-powered Pleasant View-Salt Lake City trains. UTA had projected 5,900 per weekday at opening and logged almost exactly that a year ago.

When pump prices exploded, commuters crowded the double-decker cars to average nearly 8,800 in August. With those prices now just upward of \$2 a gallon, an \$11 round-trip ticket from Ogden to Salt Lake City becomes a closer call.

"It was really busy last summer," said University of Utah commuter Alice Lundgren while riding a FrontRunner train that would drop her downtown at 8:37 a.m. In those days, she said, each of the four-seat pods carried at least two people.

On this morning, the upper deck where she rode had 18 such pods, but only 11 riders.

Despite relief at the pump, highways also are emptier this year. The latest monthly figures from the Federal Highway Administration found that Utahns in February drove 3.6 percent fewer miles on urban arterial roads than they had in February 2008.

Legacy Parkway opened four new lanes through Davis County last September. That cleared congestion on Interstate 15 and gave commuters another option.

Those who stuck with FrontRunner appear drawn to the leisurely ride.

Smedley, for instance, worked a book of puzzles Thursday. Lundgren gazed out the window while listening to something through ear buds.

"Avoid the stress of traffic every day," west Farmington resident Eric Larson listed as his top reason for riding.

The information-technology worker had beads of sweat on his forehead after riding a mountain bike to the Farmington platform. Besides the exercise and traffic dodging, he said, there's the free wireless Internet access for his laptop.

"I kind of catch up before I get to the office," he said.

Larson never rode public transportation into Salt Lake City before FrontRunner.

"A few people at work told me the express bus wasn't that exciting," he said. "It's always crowded."

That dichotomy -- trains, yes; buses, no -- is a constant annoyance to commuter-rail critics who prefer buses because they run on highways with less capital investment.

"Why do we have to subsidize snobs?" said Randal O'Toole, a senior fellow with the Cato Institute and longtime critic of rail-transit investments. Express buses running in carpool lanes, he argued, could move as many people for less.

The drop in riders is predictable in a recession, O'Toole said, as is a rebound if the economy improves. Still, he maintains it would be smarter to invest in technologies that make cars and roads more efficient, because people now have many more destinations than during the days when trains dominated U.S. travel.

TRAX exceeded expectations when it debuted in late 1999 and went on to a long growth period. O'Toole argues that's because Utah was entering an economic boom then.

This year, TRAX ridership is off, too, though not nearly as precipitously as FrontRunner. The light-rail system averaged almost 43,000 riders on weekdays in March, down from 46,000 last May and a high of 55,000 last July.

UTA Assistant General Manager Mike Allegra agrees that the numbers are largely a reflection of the economy.

"People are just combining trips," he said, "and conserving more than they ever have."

Ridership on the existing route will get a bump in 2012, Allegra predicted, when UTA finishes the second leg, south to Utah County. Thirty percent of the likely riders projected in feasibility studies have destinations north or south of Salt Lake City.

The federal government paid 80 percent of FrontRunner's \$542 million first-leg price tag, and UTA says its \$12.29 million per mile compares favorably to Legacy Parkway's \$12.23 million -- when considering the potential for future expansion, as simple as adding new rail cars.

As odd as that may sound in a time of shrinking ridership, Farmington Mayor Scott Harbertson said it's coming.

"If the economy turns around and building starts to pick up again, we'll start to see more use of FrontRunner," he said. Already there's evening rush-hour slowing where I-15 drops a lane in Kaysville, and Harbertson sees the eventual return of traffic jams pushing more people toward trains.

"I-15 and Legacy will fill up again," he said. "There's no doubt."

Though the mayor rarely travels to Salt Lake City, he said, residents tell him they appreciate the new array of options.

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