Driving the Future of Transportation

LIFE ON TRACK: VALLEY METRO CELEBRATES 10 YEARS OF LIGHT RAIL

THIS SPECIAL SECTION Brought to you by:

[Logos of various organizations]
Newcomers to metropolitan Phoenix can be forgiven for assuming that Valley Metro Rail has been in operation for longer than a decade, and that building the popular system was natural and easy.

Even for long-time residents, the trains serving Phoenix, Tempe, and Mesa, are now part of the landscape and a welcome transportation option.

Yet the $1.4 billion starter line, which opened in 2008, is an urban miracle. It came about despite a tragic history for local transit, logistic and political hurdles, and being located in a region wedded to car dependency and sprawl.

Phoenix lost its streetcars in the late 1940s. That system, begun in 1887, consisted of six lines totaling 34 miles. Buses, sold by makers such as General Motors as more flexible and economical, were substituted. But neither the city nor private contractors ever made the necessary investments to build an effective bus network.

Not that it mattered for most: In 1950, Phoenix had barely more than 100,000 people (Mesa fewer than 17,000). This was the beginning of the automotive age’s golden years. Municipal planners were pressed to extend and widen roads.

But as the area grew, lack of transportation choices hurt. Into the 1970s, it was nearly impossible to get a convenient bus from Phoenix to Tempe or Mesa. Sunday service was discontinued because of budget cuts. The bus “travel experience” was often poor, with narrow spaces, dilapidated seats, and long waits.

Growth added hundreds of thousands of people stuck on inadequate roads (residents resisted widespread freeway construction until the 1990s). Air quality, once one of the Salt River Valley’s prime selling-points, plummeted.

In response, regional leaders proposed ValTrans in 1989. The 30-year, $8.5 billion project was highlighted by 103 miles of elevated rail. Yet partly because of the leaders’ loosening hold on power in a fast-changing region and partly because of voter misconceptions and sticker-shock, ValTrans was defeated.

The calculus changed in the late 1990s, when Neil Giuliano, mayor of Tempe, campaigned for his city to build modern light rail — even if it meant going it alone. Mayor Skip Rimsza and the Greater Phoenix Chamber of Commerce led a successful vote in Phoenix, too. In both cases, grassroots outreach persuaded majorities. So did continued population growth and congestion.

Mesa stepped up, too, under Mayor Keno Hawker. This was remarkable given that Mesa is America’s most conservative large city. Mesa agreed to chip in to extend the starter line to Sycamore. It was a modest, but critical, step. Otherwise, light rail would have ended at McClintock in Tempe, making a future extension into...
Mesa much more costly and unlikely. Political opposition was fierce - paradoxically but still potently - in suburban areas that didn’t face the “risk” of mass transit but labeled it as a boondoggle. These same opponents had no problem with endless funding for freeways and wider roads.

Also, few people fully understood the value of light rail – despite its success in cities such as Dallas. Education campaigns were necessary to show the value of the system. A subway or even a monorail attracted some support, but both were prohibitively expensive. Other routes were proposed, especially because the line would run at grade along streets, as opposed to the abandoned railroad right-of-ways in cities such as Charlotte. But federal assistance depended on guaranteed ridership. That meant using the Red Line bus route, which was about at 125 percent capacity in the early 2000s.

Supporters shrewdly tied light rail to other transportation projects, including freeways, streets, and buses. Proposition 400, a half-cent sales tax passed by 58 percent of Maricopa County voters in 2004, ensured a big chunk of light-rail funding. Other sources were the federal government and local funds from the three cities.

Even so, much of the hard work was only beginning. Officials worked overtime to negotiate parcels, mitigate temporarily lost customers for small businesses during construction, and educate the media that treated this newfangled system to a scrutiny never applied to the disruption from roadwork.

A crucial element of success was ASU President Michael Crow’s decision to place a campus in downtown Phoenix. Although much of metro Phoenix’s employment is on the suburban fringes, ASU Tempe and downtown Phoenix ensured a base of rail customers.

Another essential champion was the late Rep. Ed Pastor, who fought for federal funding and steered it effectively through Congress.

Since the opening a decade ago, Mesa and Phoenix have extended light rail, with more growth to come. Rail has enabled a construction boom along the line, as well as giving low-income workers access to reliable transit that wasn’t available before. People from all walks of life take the train to work, games, concerts, and school.

Few projects have been as transformational. With continued leadership, the coming decades should see an even stronger system, a backbone of economic growth, transportation choice, and environmental progress.

Jon Talton, a former columnist for the Arizona Republic, is a mystery writer and Phoenix historian. He’s a regular user of Valley Metro Rail.
**IMPORTANT STORIES** should be shared and passed on to future generations. One of these important stories is the impact of the addition of 26 miles of light rail in Phoenix, Tempe and Mesa. These highlights from our Quality of Life report show how Valley Metro Rail has affected and improved it’s surrounding communities over the past 10 years.

### 1996 + 2000
Local transit-supportive sales taxes are approved in Tempe and Phoenix.

### 2004
**NOVEMBER**
Maricopa County voters approve Proposition 400 that allows funding of the Regional Transportation Plan.

### 2005
**FEBRUARY**
Official groundbreaking ceremony for the 20-mile light rail system.

### 2005
**JANUARY**
Valley Metro Rail receives signed Full Funding Grant Agreement for $587 million in federal funding for the 20-mile light rail line.

### 2008
**AUGUST**
Opening of the Central Mesa Extension to Main Street and Mesa Drive.

### 2008
**DECEMBER 27**
The 20-mile Valley Metro Rail line opens for service.

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- **16.5 million riders** in 2017 on Valley Metro Rail vs. **2.8 million riders** in 2007 on prior route (Red Line bus).
- **35,000+ jobs** have been created within one-half mile of light rail since 2008.
2,200+ new affordable housing units in the corridor since light rail construction began.

low cost and station locations are the two top reasons why ASU students ride light rail.

OCTOBER
Groundbreaking of the Gilbert Road Extension to Main Street and Gilbert Road.

AUGUST
Major construction begins on the region’s first modern streetcar in Tempe.

MARCH
Opening of the Northwest Phoenix Extension to 19th Avenue and Dunlap Avenue.

JUNE
Groundbreaking of the first new station along an existing corridor at 50th and Washington streets.

DECEMBER 27, 2018
10-YEAR ANNIVERSARY OF LIGHT RAIL

2,200+ new affordable housing units in the corridor since light rail construction began.
Maricopa County’s regional transportation system is the envy of the country. Commutes, despite their challenges, are easier than in other major cities – and far easier than in the not-so-distant days before Loops 101 and 202 were built.

In addition to getting people where they’re going, the regional system has spurred development across the Valley.

“It’s been a tremendous asset to the economy of the region,” says former Tempe Mayor Neil Giuliano, now president and CEO of Greater Phoenix Leadership. “Our forward-thinking approach is instructive for companies thinking about moving here, for our quality of life, for the overall vibe and culture of a growing, emerging, strong metropolitan region.”

Maricopa County voters made this happen when they overwhelmingly passed Proposition 400 in 2004, committing billions of dollars over 20 years for highways, regional arterial streets and transit, including light rail.

As Prop. 400 nears its sunset, leaders are starting to talk about the need to renew the half-cent sales tax.

WHY AN EXTENSION?

— Population growth. Maricopa County is expected to grow by 1 million people over the next 10 to 15 years, and most of those people will live inside Loops 101 and 202, says Scott Smith, CEO of Valley Metro. There’s no space to build more highways, he says, so we’ll need to find efficiencies via light rail, autonomous vehicles and technology such as real-time traffic alerts, changes that get the most from self-driving cars or traffic signals that “talk” to cars.

Smith and growth expert Shannon Scutari, a transportation advisor for two Arizona governors, believe the future will include more high-capacity, long-trip solutions, such as rapid bus transit or commuter rail, connecting people to a variety of short-trip options such as bike and pedestrian pathways and urban trails in central cities.

— Maintenance. There are two key needs.

The original stretches of Loop 101 are more than 30 years old, and the rest of the loop system will follow those stretches into middle age. “We’re good at building the first time, but not so good at rebuilding,” Smith says. A significant portion of a Prop. 400 extension would protect the original investment in highways.

One-third of Prop. 400 receipts pay for regional bus service as well as paratransit (on-call services for people with mobility issues). Without Prop. 400, those services would be dramatically reduced and, in some cases, eliminated, Smith says.

— Filling needs. New interchanges and fixing choke points such as Interstate 17’s Durango curve can provide added capacity and relief for peak commuters. Light rail extensions need funding beyond 2025. Technologies will emerge, creating new connection opportunities. (In 2004, autonomous cars existed only on “The Jetsons.” Today, they’re beginning to extend the range of light rail in innovative ways.)

WHAT WILL AN EXTENSION LOOK LIKE?

Details of a Prop. 400 extension have yet to be nailed down. First, regional leaders will ask the Legislature to authorize an election, a step required under state law. Then, the Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG) will begin a one- to two-year process to formulate the plan. The County Board of Supervisors could then call an election, potentially as early as 2022.

Giuliano expects it will include extensive outreach to various stakeholders – government leaders, business executives, residents, Native American leaders – to identify needs into the 2040s. He says the eventual plan will be data driven and people centered.

It likely will include a concrete list of projects for the first decade or so. Smith hopes it includes flexibility in the second decade, so leaders (with ample oversight) could adjust for unforeseen developments. Smith recently met with legislators who pressed him to expand transit options into the rapidly growing areas they represent. Because Prop. 400 was fixed in the beginning, he can’t accommodate their wishes.

Like the original Prop. 400, expect the extension to support a multimodal system that includes highways, roadways, rail and bus transit, urban trails, bike and pedestrian connectivity.

“We have the challenge of congestion and the need to accommodate growth, so it’s important we think about what transportation needs to look like in the future, and how we may utilize technology and innovation to get the most out of the entire system.” Scutari says.
Transportation is undergoing rapid change right before our eyes. A decade from now, how Valley residents get from place to place will look and feel much different than it does today.

It would be easy to sit back, watch and wait. But Valley Metro and Waymo prefer a different tack; they are defining the future through a first-in-the-nation partnership between a public transit company and a private autonomous vehicle company.

They are forging ahead with an experiment in mobility. Waymo’s self-driving, or autonomous, vehicles will provide a “first and last mile” connection to or from Valley Metro’s bus and light rail stops. People who live beyond walking distance to a bus stop or rail station (or have a destination outside the traditional corridor) will gain access to mass transit, an option more and more people need and desire.

The program started in late September with a conservative approach. So far, about 30 Valley Metro employees have taken more than 200 trips across the East Valley – using the service to get to and from park-and-rides, transit stations or to run errands.

“It’s gratifying to be studying such an innovative service for our riders,” said Valley Metro Service Planning Manager Joe Gregory. “I’ve used Waymo several times. It’s been a great experience and given me more flexibility in my travels across our transit network.”

The next phase of the program will incorporate RideChoice customers, primarily seniors and people with disabilities.

Public transportation is an integral part of our cities, providing vital social, economic, and environmental benefits. That’s why the Valley, like cities around the world, invested in light rail and buses — to help people commute, move around and connect to life.

Mass transit, though, is mostly used by people who live near a bus or light rail line. It has not been a viable option for large portions of the greater community, especially those living in the suburbs. This new partnership brings it closer.

Some critics trumpet the arrival of self-driving cars as the end of mass transit. Not so, say Waymo and Valley Metro. Waymo’s goal has always been to be an enabler rather than a disruptor and that means working with Valley Metro to get the greatest return from the community’s investment in transit.

The need for buses and trains will not disappear; in some cities, the growth of ride-sharing services has resulted in greater gridlock. Meanwhile, the age of highway construction is ending.

Mass transit is already the most effective, efficient way to move large numbers of people over longer distances. Transportation planners envision a future in which people walk, bike or drive to nearby destinations, while mass transit handles long-haul, high-capacity needs.

The Valley Metro-Waymo partnership is a step in that direction. If all goes as planned, people will find it easier to take a Waymo vehicle to the nearest rail stop, get on a train within minutes, avoid the hassles of congestion and parking, step off the platform into another Waymo car and go to their destination’s front door.

In this era of consumer choice, this effort will help solve the challenge cities face of making mass transit available to as many people as possible. It maximizes taxpayers’ investment in light rail and bus lines.

Arizona has emerged as a hub of innovative ideas, technology startups and entrepreneurial thinking. This unique partnership, which could transform the future of transportation, will complement that environment.

Honoring Our Champion

“In 2008, on a very cold day, we opened the first 20 miles (of light rail). I’ve always thought this system is an adventure for the next 25, 30 years. Because people will use it—they feel comfortable, it’s affordable and it gets them to their destination, recreation or work.”

Thank you, Cong. Ed Pastor, for being our greatest transit champion.
A Celebration
10 YEARS IN
THE MAKING.

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FREE RAIL RIDES ALL DAY.

12/27  5-10 PM

Talking Stick Resort
Arena

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