



Figure 1: Siemens Low Floor S70 Light Rail Vehicle

Trax, is the Fare Fair?

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Transit Express

Ever since the extensive streetcar system in Salt Lake City was abandoned last century the only mode of public transportation available to the general public of Salt Lake County were the buses which still run today. In 1999 that all changed when the light rail system called Trax was introduced to the citizens of Utah. From its beginnings as one line from Salt Lake City to Sandy it has expanded greatly, soon it will run from its connection with Frontrunner all the way to Draper and out west to Daybreak and the Salt Lake International Airport. While there have been changes in the service provided by Trax, there have also been changes in the prices people have to pay and ways in which they can reach the stations.

Fare Prices

A very large group of people (25%) who ride Trax consist of students. (Lee) With the prices of fuel rising throughout the nation, public transit prices continue to rise

alongside. In 1999 fares were much more affordable, but with recent rises in price, different educational establishments have changed their policies on paying or subsidizing student tickets. When asked about LDS Business colleges decision to no longer help pay fares for students, the Dean of Life, Matthew Tittle said, "We've had several students approach us (who said) this might make the difference in us coming to the school." (Lee)

Another issue that has come from the higher fare prices is the decision between driving and riding the train. Myah Romer, an Ogden resident had been considering riding the

Frontrunner train to get to work but recent price hikes have made him think twice about it. "At \$145 a month, it was about sixes between driving and taking the train," Romer said. "At \$160, I'd rather just drive and have the extra time at home with my kids. (Raymond)

The reason for the increases in far prices is the same as for the increase in much of our everyday cost of living expenses, fuel prices, as the fuel costs go up for our cars it does as well for trains. The difference of \$15 dollars a month in the case of Myah Romner might not seem like much but there are other costs associated with driving that are not present in public transportation. Everyone that drives a personal vehicle every day doesn't just pay for gas, every mile they drive depreciates the value of their vehicle, wear and tear on vehicle parts accumulate to a point where costly repairs are needed, and the dangers of getting in an accident are much higher in a personal vehicle than on public transportation, not to

mention the increased insurance costs if accidents do occur. Other perks of riding Trax are: extra study time for students, the possibility of a power nap, and the chance to meet new people.

Availability

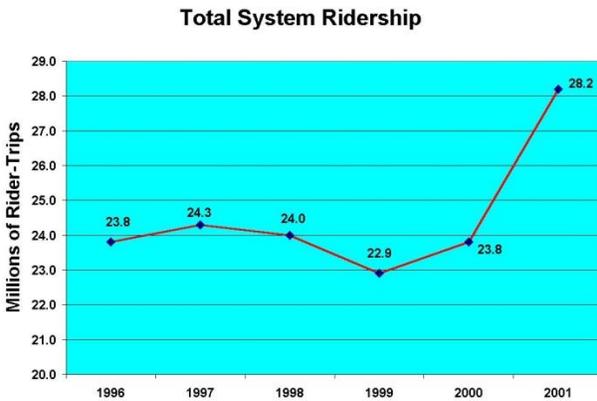


Figure 2: UTA Ridership showing increase with Trax service starting in December 1999 (LightRailNow!)

When the idea of a light rail system was first introduced to the people of Utah there was a great deal of opposition and criticism towards the project. Many people claimed that there wouldn't be enough riders to make the train worth the price that was to be paid for it. The concerns of critics were soon addressed on the opening day of service when the trains were overcrowded with over 25,000 passengers (UtahRails.Net) and ridership steadily increased as time went on and new lines were added.

While more affluent areas such as Draper may not seem to be the kinds of places where Trax will be heavily used, as lines reach out to the western sections of the valley, people with lower incomes that could save a lot of money have increased

availability to the trains. There are bus routes throughout the valley that can bring people to Trax stations quite easily although they may add quite a bit of time to people's commutes. Along with making transportation easier for many people there are health benefits associated with using public transportation such as Trax. People who live in transit oriented communities have more opportunities to be physically active when using mass transit, "Taking a moderately active 15- to 20-minute walk to offset 100 calories each day would prevent the average adult gain of 1 to 2 pounds per year" (Werner)



Figure 3 Map of Trax and FrontRunner Lines that will be complete by 2014

In an effort to make Trax more available to those who need it most UTA has a program in place that give seniors and people with disabilities reduced fare thereby helping those with the least resources to be able to get around on their own. (UTA) For people who live, work, or shop in downtown Salt Lake City there is even a free fare zone consisting of the stations from Courthouse and Library stations to the Salt Lake Central station where Trax meets up with FrontRunner.

Economic Efficiency



Figure 4 Trax Passengers, most paid for the ride, some did not.

Anyone who has ridden on Trax frequently has probably had their ticket checked, and on some occasions has witnessed someone who has not paid for their ticket get caught. While one might think that this happens quite a bit considering how infrequently tickets are checked on the Trax, but according to a KSL report by Ed Yeats in 2005, "There are about 1.3 million people who boarded TRAX last month and only 1.5-

percent didn't pay their fare. And compared with other transit systems, that's an enviable track record." (Ed Yeats) Even with such a low percentage of people riding for free that is still money walking right out the door. Unfortunately for the Trax system, unlike subway systems that can funnel riders through areas where they have to pay to get on the train, an above ground open platform with no regular employees on site it is much more difficult to control who buys a ticket and who rides for free.

Trax brings in a lot of profit from fares, but without the aid of the government the project probably never would have been started. According to the Deseret News "Washington still owes money on its commitment to the Mid-Jordan TRAX line and the FrontRunner line to Ogden. Money for the federal share of a proposed line extension to Draper was included in President Barack Obama's budget, unveiled in February, but that budget never received any serious consideration by Congress. In addition, the federal government annually provides about \$45 million to \$50 million to help with ongoing operating and maintenance costs." (Deseret News) It's said that there is no such thing as a free lunch, whenever the government pays for something, it is coming out of our pockets. It will probably take decades of profitable years to make up the money that the taxpayers have put into the public transportation system in Utah.

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