

# MetroRail to begin service March 22

*Federal regulators OK Capital Metro's long-delayed commuter line from Leander to downtown Austin.*

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[Austin MetroRail Map](#)

Passenger rail in Austin for the past 40 years the subject of speculation, argumentation, elections and, finally, construction will leave the station early in the morning of March 22 , Capital Metro officials announced Friday .

Federal rail regulators, in town the past several days as Capital Metro did on-schedule testing of the 32-mile line from Leander to downtown Austin, pronounced the system ready to go Friday morning. The line, which was to have opened a year ago (and even earlier under original predictions), had been plagued by glitches in its signal and gate crossing systems much of last year.

But after a troubleshooting process that involved bringing in signalization experts to diagnose the problems and revamping both hardware and software, Capital Metro in recent weeks had indicated that the system was working properly.

Capital Metro officials have predicted that the MetroRail line will average about 2,000 boardings a day its first year, which likely equates to about a thousand people using the train instead of a bus or car to get to work. Despite that modest initial ridership, the coming train service, Capital Metro board member John Langmore said, is the "start of a new day. Things will never be the same. It's going to change the way we get around and the way we view public transportation in this community."

**The line will have nine stations, and service will run every 35 minutes starting at 5:25 a.m. and 3:45 p.m. There will be 19 daily runs: six southbound and three northbound in the morning, and six northbound and four southbound in the evening. Most of the "reverse" runs — those going north in the morning and south in the evening — will not run the full 32 miles.**

There will be no regular weekend service for the foreseeable future, although Capital Metro officials have left open the possibility of isolated runs for special events. The commuter rail service will share the tracks with Capital Metro freight service. The passenger runs will be during weekdays, and the freight trains will run on nights and weekends. Federal regulators required such "temporal separation" of the two kinds of trains.

The full 32-mile trip should take just over an hour , Capital Metro says.

The red, white and gray train cars will each have 108 seats and room for about 90 people to stand. There are areas near the doors with room for wheelchairs and bike hooks.

The three suburban stations — Leander, Lakeline and Howard Lane — have park-and-ride lots, where parking is free. The six stations closer in do not have parking.

There will be "connector" buses waiting for trains at stations at Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard and downtown, with five bus routes to the University of Texas, the Capitol complex and other points in the central business district. Those connector routes will run in the afternoon as well, taking passengers back to those two stations in time for outbound routes.

The March 22 opening marks the end of a very long process of getting urban rail in Austin. Advocates as early as 1970 were calling on the City of Austin (Capital Metro did not exist until 1985 ) to create a streetcar service. And in the early 1980s, the city bought the Llano-to-Giddings railroad that MetroRail will run on from Southern Pacific with the express purpose of someday having passenger service on it.

When voters approved Capital Metro's creation and authorized a maximum 1 percent sales tax, the agency was seen as not only the new operator of local bus service but also the developer of future passenger rail. For the next 15 years or so, that service was envisioned as electric light-rail, essentially souped-up streetcars that would run not only on downtown streets but also on longer routes.

An election in November 2000 to authorize a \$1.9 billion , 52-mile light-rail system failed to get approval by about 2,000 votes. So Capital Metro came back in 2004 with a much smaller plan, one involving the existing track to Leander and self-propelled, diesel-powered train cars.

Capital Metro said it could build it for \$60 million while borrowing \$30 million for six train cars and paying that back over 10 years. About \$30 million of that cost, they said, would come from the federal government. The system, officials said, was to have begun service by "early 2008." Voters, by 62 percent , said go ahead.

Much of that did not pan out. Capital Metro never officially sought the federal money. The agency now says it has spent \$105 million on the system, not \$90 million, but that excludes millions of dollars of directly related costs. And the system will be opening two years after that original prediction.

The price to ride

The agency won't charge fares the first week.

One-way for the full 32-mile route will be \$3, \$2 for shorter trips.

A day pass, which will allow a customer to ride all Capital Metro buses as well, will cost \$6, and a monthly pass with the same privileges will cost \$70.

Five-day passes will be sold for \$20.

All but the five-day pass will initially be available at the stations; the five-day passes will be available there at a later date. Starting March 15, all tickets will be sold at H-E-B grocery stores, at [www.capmetro.org](http://www.capmetro.org) and at the agency's transit store at 323 Congress Ave.

Passengers will not have to go through a turnstile or show their ticket or pass to board. But after the free period ends, Capital Metro will hire off-duty Austin police officers to randomly check whether passengers have tickets. A rider without a ticket will be forced to de-board and buy a ticket. Even later, the officers will issue citations to those without a ticket.

The story so far

November 2000: Voters reject a \$1.9 billion, 52-mile light-rail system with many routes on city streets.

November 2004: Voters, by 62 percent, approve a \$90 million commuter line from Leander to downtown Austin.

October 2007: First of six Stadler railcars manufactured in Switzerland arrive in Austin.

October 2008: Capital Metro, with two of its stations not yet under construction, drops "fall 2008" opening date and announces March 30, 2009, as the beginning of service.

Mid-March 2009: Plagued by signal and crossing gate problems, agency postpones March 30 opening indefinitely.

December 2009: Capital Metro fires rail contractor Veolia Transportation, replacing them with Herzog Transit Services.

March 5, 2010: Agency announces that MetroRail service will begin March 22.

**Courtesy of JB Goodwin**