

# Tribune

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## All aboard: Light rail ready to change Valley

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*The light rail trains are testing before their debut to the public on Sunday. Rides will be free for the first few days of operation.*

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Light rail already has changed the look of transportation in the Valley, and it might alter the look of the Valley itself. After decades of debate and years of laying tracks, the debut of the system, called Metro, is at hand.

Six Valley Metro stations to host opening parties [<http://www.eastvalleytribune.com/story/133114>]

INTERACTIVE: Light rail rider's guide [[http://www.eastvalleytribune.com/page/flash?h=580&w=800&file=light\\_rail/light\\_rail.swf](http://www.eastvalleytribune.com/page/flash?h=580&w=800&file=light_rail/light_rail.swf)]

The festivities begin this morning with preview rides for selected members of the public, followed by a celebratory banquet for VIPs tonight.

On Saturday, parties will be held at stations along the 20-mile Mesa-to-Phoenix line, and everyone is invited to board the trains for free. The no-fare policy runs through New Year's Eve.

According to experts in the fields of transportation, planning and development, Metro's trains might take the Valley in new directions.

Because this kind of mass transit encourages high-density development near its stations, the future might be found by looking inward, toward the Valley's core, and up, as the buildings where we live, work and play will likely grow taller.

In other words, Metro may help slow the Phoenix area's sprawl.

"This gives us an additional alternative for adding population," said Mindy Korth, an executive vice president at commercial real estate services firm CB Richard Ellis Group. "But it doesn't mean everything we've laid down already is wrong."

Korth recalled a recent tabletop exercise, AZ-1 Reality Check, in which 300 of the Valley's leaders plotted the region's future. Their tools were different colored Legos (red represented where the jobs were while yellow represented housing) and yarn to lay out roads, highways and rail.

From the 30 groups of participants there was a great diversity of results, Korth said, but a consensus opinion developed: "We needed to grow with density instead of just spreading out."

Aaron Golub, an assistant professor at Arizona State University's School of Planning and School of Sustainability, sees three explanations in the greater demand for urban living: Budget-busting gas prices; congested roads; and the growing numbers of retirees and singles waiting until later in life to marry.

The first two factors make living in the suburbs expensive and impractical, while those two demographic groups aren't in need of single-family homes.

"All of these add up to the growing importance of rail," Golub said.

Already, where Metro's tracks run, development is creating places where people want to be.

Consider Apache Boulevard. Not too many years ago, this seedy street was a crumbling collection of businesses losing the war against blight and decay. Watson's Flowers, on the Tempe-Mesa border, would open in the morning only after rousting the drunks passed out near the front door.

And now?


"Property values have gone up, vagrants have moved out," florist Nathan Johnson said. "There's less crime on the boulevard; there's even been less accidents - granted, there's been less traffic" because of construction.

On the other end of Tempe, developer Lee Chesnut is so confident in the future of light rail, he paid \$1.3 million for a station to be built in front of his new office building.

Papago Gateway Center, at Mill Avenue and Washington Street, is one of the most environmentally friendly structures in the Valley, so Chesnut said he would've "regretted from Day One" watching trains glide past, stopping nowhere nearby.

"As a developer, I want to do everything I can possibly do to position the building for its greatest potential," Chesnut said. "(Metro) represents the kind of future we all hope to be involved with: It's a smarter, healthier future and not development as usual."



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