

ON THE BI-LEVEL

Metra



Metra's Monthly Commuter Newsletter

March 2016

Metra launches Wi-Fi test

Metra is now offering cellular Wi-Fi hotspots on one railcar for each of its 11 lines as part of a pilot program to determine whether the technology can provide free and dependable Internet access to customers

onboard Metra trains.

"We continue to explore ways to provide free Wi-Fi on our trains and hope our customers will tell us if they find these new hotspots valuable," said Metra Executive Director/CEO Don

Orseno. "If it's financially feasible and our customers like the free service, our agency would seek funding or sponsorships to install Wi-Fi on more railcars."

The six-month pilot program is expected to cost approximate-

ly \$35,000.

The pilot program is similar to one recently launched by the Northern Indiana Commuter Transportation District (NICTD) on its South Shore Line. Like the

(Continued on Page 2)

Give us your feedback about our new seats

Metra has put into service the first three of 30 railcars featuring a new style of seats with armrests, built-in cup holders and better head, neck and lumbar support.

Metra plans to add the new seating to about two cars per month between now and the end of the year on all Metra lines except the Metra Electric as part of a pilot program. Customers who use the new seats are being asked to provide feedback.

"These new seats offer amenities our customers have never had before – cup holders, armrests and higher backs," said Metra Executive Director/CEO Don Orseno. "We are asking our customers to give us feedback about the new seats, and we hope they like them and find them to be more comfortable than the

(Continued on Page 2)



The last six of the original Highliner cars carried their last passengers on Feb. 12.

Highliners make their final run

Forty-four years after the debut of the original Highliner cars on the Metra Electric Line, the last six of them carried their final passengers last month from Chicago to University Park. State Sen. Martin Sandoval, State Rep. Al Riley, Metra Executive Director/CEO Don Orseno, members of the Metra Board of Directors and other guests took part in the

official send-off from Millennium Station.

"These cars have served us well and have been a central part of the history of the Illinois Central and Metra's Electric service," said Orseno. "But while letting them go is somewhat bittersweet, it's time. The new Highliners enable Metra to provide our customers with more reliable service,

better amenities and reduced maintenance costs."

The original Highliner cars began serving customers on the Illinois Central (IC), now the Metra Electric Line, on May 31, 1971. The cars were purchased in two separate orders. The first 130 cars were purchased from the St. Louis Car Company by the newly

(Continued on Page 2)

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On the Bi-Level

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We can't guarantee all letters will be printed or answered. Please keep letters to less than 200 words and include your first name, hometown and what line you ride. (Names are not required but strongly encouraged.) We reserve the right to edit letter for length and grammar.

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Seats

(Continued from Page 1)
current seating."

The new blue-and-gray seats were purchased last fall after Metra feedback collected from customers indicated that more than half preferred the new seats to the old ones.

The new seats are in a fixed position facing the vestibule; that means half the seats will be facing backward no matter which direction the train travels.

Metra is not spending any extra money on the new seats; they are being installed in cars whose seats need replacement anyway,

and rather than replace them with the old bench style we are replacing them with the new style. The new seats cost Metra the same as the older seats, but there are more manufacturers of this style in the rail industry, which is expected to keep the prices competitive and possibly drive down future costs.

The new seats are being used on 30 railcars going through Metra's Amerail car rehabilitation program. The cars are being refurbished in-house, by Metra workers with years of experience, dedication and know-how. Metra has streamlined its processes over the past several years to create an ultra-efficient operation that can strip and rebuild a car in 32 days.



Wi-Fi

(Continued from Page 1)
NICTD program, this Wi-Fi service is available on a car-by-car basis instead of a full train.

In general, the hotspots are limited to a 1 megabyte download speed per user. Checking email and Internet browsing are the intended uses of this service, not streaming video. Metra has posted information onboard to notify customers that streaming video will likely impair service and that there may be dead zones.

Metra will rotate the 11 Wi-Fi cars among each of its lines throughout the pilot program. The Wi-Fi cars are labeled with decals



on the exterior and will be positioned as the end car on the train (opposite end from the locomotive), when possible. Conductors will also alert customers to the location of the Wi-Fi car through announcements on all outbound trains.

To access the free Wi-Fi service, customers can simply select "Metra Wi-Fi Onboard" from the list of options on their smartphones, tablets or laptop computers. You will have to agree to the terms and conditions to gain access to the service.

Customers can then visit www.metrarail.com/wifisurvey to provide feedback on the quality of Wi-Fi service.

Last year, Metra completed installation of charging stations at all five downtown stations and implemented free Wi-Fi in the waiting areas.

Cars

(Continued from Page 1)
formed Chicago South Suburban Mass Transit District and leased back to the IC. Federal funds covered two-thirds of the \$40 million cost and the IC paid the rest. In 1978-1979, the Regional Transportation Authority (RTA) bought the second order of 36 cars from Bombardier for \$28 million. Metra took ownership of the railroad and the Highliners in 1987, rehabbing the cars and changing the color scheme from orange and

brown to silver and blue.

The original Highliners offered air-conditioning to customers accustomed to riding in cars with open windows during the summer months, and cushioned seats rather than the wicker benches provided in the 1920s-era cars they replaced. However, the original Highliners did not have restrooms and their carbon steel construction proved less durable than the stainless steel cars that became the industry standard. (The new cars have restrooms.)

The push to replace the original Highliners with more modern

and durable cars began with the delivery of the first 26 new generation stainless steel Highliner cars in 2006, purchased with \$76 million in funding provided by the state of Illinois. In August 2010, the Metra Board approved a contract with Nippon Sharyo to purchase 160 more Highliner cars. Funding for this purchase totaling \$585 million was provided by the state.

Special thanks to Metra Board Member Norman Carlson for providing historical information used in conjunction with the Highliner retirement event.

SOUND OFF

Serene seatmate

A dude was taking up two seats sitting with his legs folded up in full lotus position, eyes closed in deep meditation. I asked to sit down. He unfolded his legs and placed his bag on the floor, and I took my seat. He then resumed the position by refolding his legs and resting his stocking foot on my thigh. I was about to say something, when a feeling of serene calm overcame me, and I was barely able to stifle an involuntary "Ommmmm..." I was in a state of nirvana when we jolted to a halt in Union Station.

New Disciple

Try doing that behind the wheel of your car!

On the other hand....

My morning train ride was disrupted by a passenger who put on her full face of makeup while on her commute. This is OK by me, but I had to draw the line when she pulled a nail file out. I waited several minutes while she was filing away, but after a respectable amount of time I had to ask her to stop, saying that the noise brought to mind nails on a chalkboard. She kindly stopped, which I am very grateful for. But I would hope in the future that people realize when your nail particles are being released to the air (so much so that you are wiping down your own clothes and purse), this is an activity to be done in the privacy of your own home, or a nail salon!

Kyleen

May we suggest yoga as a calming influence?

Quieting influence

Are passengers or conduc-



tors responsible for ensuring that Quiet Cars remain quiet? I have come across a few real chatterboxes and no one seems to care. They may be oblivious to the fact that they are on a Quiet Car. Please enlighten me.

Greg

Our policy on Quiet Cars is that they are largely peer-enforced. If you encounter someone being loud in a Quiet Car, we encourage you to politely point out that they are in the Quiet Car and ask them to kindly tone it down. If the passenger continues to make noise, you should inform the conductor. Remember, while our goal is to keep cars as quiet as possible, passengers should not expect the car to be completely silent.

Mobile issues

During our first foray into the mobile app, we had phone issues that made the monthly pass unusable in the middle of the month. We left a message on the Metra mobile number and received a call back the next day (Luckily had a 10-ride). Shout out to the assistance and KINDNESS of Elizabeth in helping resolve our issue. She was a pleasure to talk to! Monthly mobile ticket working again!!!

Denise

Thanks for giving us a chance to remind everyone that mobile Metra tickets are now available via the new Ventra App. Just download the app from the App Store or Google Play

and you can buy and display any kind of Metra mobile tickets on your smartphone. If you have any issues, friendly folks such as Elizabeth will be happy to help.

Stop the madness

I am wondering why inbound trains in the morning at Route 59 regularly pull forward, so that two or three cars are off the east side of the platform. The platform was lengthened years ago to accommodate the long trains.

Ed

We pull the head cars off the platform to control crowding. Everyone insists on riding the head cars, and it just isn't possible. We pull the cars off to encourage people to the rear of the train.

Safe landing

Thank you to the two gentleman who hauled my – ahem – up after I slipped and fell on my – ahem – on the Adams Street escalator to Union Station on the evening of Feb. 16. I was too klutzy to get up by myself and too flustered to thank them properly.

Janet

We're glad someone was there to help. We'd like to extend our thanks to your helpers as well. And we hope your ahem suffered no lasting harm.

Finding Elvis

Following the Elvis theme of the January/February issue, when people want to talk, select your car with caution: only fools rush in. And when enforcing Quiet Car rules, be considerate, don't be cruel. Lastly, regarding Pets on Trains, just two words: hound dog.

Mark

Winter Travel Notes

Metra starts process to buy new railcars

Metra last month issued a request for proposals (RFP) for the design and production of new railcars as part of the agency's 10-year, \$2.4 billion modernization plan. Once the vendor is selected, the estimated time to ramp up production is expected to be about 24 months, with Metra expected to take delivery of the first cars in 2018. The last time Metra received new railcars for lines other than the Metra Electric was in 2006. Metra's 2016 Budget provides funding to begin purchasing 10 new railcars. If needed state funding becomes available, under this new contract, as many as 106 new cars could be delivered between 2018 and 2019 and 261 cars additional cars could be delivered between 2020 and 2024. Another RFP for new locomotive engines is expected to be issued when funding for those engines is secured and allocated.

Board approves new marketing contract

The Metra Board of Directors has approved a three-year, \$4 million contract with Pulsar Advertising, Inc. to serve as Metra's new marketing and advertising agency of record. Pulsar's scope of work for Metra will include a customer segmentation study, market research, branding services, development of a strategic marketing plan and assistance implementing the plan. Pulsar is a full-service marketing agency that is nationally recognized for its work with transit agencies around the country, including the New York Metropolitan

Transportation Authority, which encompasses both the Metro-North Railroad and Long Island Rail Road. Pulsar provides a wide range of expertise in strategy, planning, account management, creative development, branding, media buying and placement and implementation of campaigns. The agency is also a certified disadvantaged business enterprise firm. The \$4 million contract value represents an annual increase in spending over the previous five years, but an overall decrease from marketing budgets prior to 2010.

Heritage Corridor adds afternoon departure

Heritage Corridor riders will have a new option for getting home each weekday when Metra adds a new mid-afternoon departure from Chicago on March 14. The new 2:45 p.m. departure from Chicago Union Station will expand weekday service on the line from six to seven trains (three inbound morning runs and four outbound afternoon/evening trains). The train will make stops at Summit, Willow Springs, Lemont and Lockport before arriving at its final destination in Joliet at 3:50 p.m. The new service is the result of years of effort by Metra and elected officials along the route. The new service required agreements from Canadian National, which owns the tracks and operates freight service on the line, as well as Amtrak, the owner of Union Station. Metra would like to thank everyone who helped make this added train a reality.

Tips to deter parking thieves or vandals

To deter would-be thieves or vandals, customers who park at Metra stations are reminded that they should never leave valuables in plain view, even if their car is locked. Take them with you or put them in the trunk, or at least out of sight. Vehicle owners can easily and inexpensively protect against wheel thefts by adding wheel locks (also known as locking lug nuts). Metra Police ask anyone with information about incidents or suspicious activity in Metra parking lots to call 312-322-2800.

Metra is best bet for St. Patrick's events

Coming downtown to celebrate St. Patrick's Day? Metra is the best way to get there. Metra will be adding trains or cars to eight of its lines on March 12 to accommodate Chicagoans who want to attend the St. Patrick's Day parade in downtown Chicago or watch the dyeing of the Chicago River. In addition, Metra will adjust the schedule of several Rock Island trains for the South Side Irish Parade on March 13. For more information, go to www.metrarail.com. Don't forget about Metra's \$8 Weekend Pass, good for unlimited travel all weekend long. In addition, up to three children 11 and under ride free on weekends with each adult.

Save big with transit benefits

You can save hundreds to more than \$1,000 a year on commuting costs through payroll tax savings when you participate in a pre-tax transit benefit plan at work. For customers who use a Monthly Pass, participating in a pre-tax transit benefit plan is like getting three months of free Metra tickets each year! Contact your Human Resources Department to learn if your employer participates in a pre-tax transit benefit plan. For more information, go to www.metrarail.com/transitbenefits.



SPRING IS
RIGHT AROUND
THE CORNER.

WINTER WARM UP SALE*

Save 20% on select Midwest routes to St. Louis, Grand Rapids, Dearborn, Champaign, Springfield and more before March 30th.



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