



On the Bi-Level

Published by Metra's Media Relations Department. Send letters, questions or feedback to On the Bi-Level, Metra, 547 W. Jackson, Chicago IL, 60661-5717. Or e-mail onthebilevel@metrarr.com.

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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Got a question? We've got an answer

Heritage delays...

I was on the Heritage Corridor 5:25 p.m. train from Chicago to Lemont on Friday, Oct. 23, 2009. Our train moved out of Union Station and then sat on the train tracks just south of the station and did not move for about an hour. Our arrival time to Lemont is typically 6:12 p.m. but we arrived 7:50 p.m. This is unrealistic and unacceptable for a commuter train ride! There was no given reason for us to be sitting idle on the tracks for so long. We were basically held hostage on a train without any reason or validation for the delay.

I checked the Metra website before I left work Friday evening for any service updates and the update status memo stated that delays would be 15 to 30 minutes on the Heritage Corridor line. At this point, this was manageable and acceptable to me. The next day I was told by others who travel on the Southwest Service line that their trains on Friday were only delayed 15 minutes! Why was our train delayed for over 2 hours and the Southwest Service was almost on time?

Jody

We had a lot of e-mail about Heritage Corridor service on that night and would like to offer our apologies for the delays and for the inaccurate estimate of how long those delays would be. Here's what happened: The freight train that derailed the day before blocked the two sets of tracks used by the SouthWest Service and Heritage Corridor. Those tracks are owned by Amtrak, not Metra. Early that Friday afternoon, Amtrak was able to open one set but needed to repair the other – which included a damaged switch used by Heritage Corridor trains but not SouthWest Service trains.

With one track open we thought we could operate both lines, with some delays, thinking it was better to offer a delayed train instead of no train. However, we did not anticipate the traffic jam that formed with freight and passenger trains waiting for Amtrak to give them clearance to go through the area. And because the signals were damaged in the derailment, trains had to move through the area at a slower rate. Heritage Corridor trains were more affected because they had to make a complex detour around the damaged switch.

The wait was just like the one that airline passengers experience during iffy weather – you wait, hoping that at any moment you'll get clearance to take off. We thought we'd get the OK to go through the area at any moment, and that's why we didn't turn back. We thought wrong, and we're sorry. Adding to the communication problems was the fact that the PA system on one car of the train malfunctioned. You would have thought it was Friday the 13th, with all that bad luck.

...and BNSF delays

I ride the BNSF to Route 59 and have found the 5:45 train from Union Station to Route 59 to be frequently late – either it slows west of Chicago or stops east of Naperville to let other trains pass. Aside from safety, your prime mission is for trains to be on time and that is not happening with the train I ride. When I ask the conductor, I get a vague comment about freight trains determining schedules. If you have no control over train schedules and cannot fix the lateness of this train then change your arrival times to reflect that reality or lower the fare since you are not achieving your key objective of on time arrival.

Tom

That line has not had a good few months. All of you who have written us know it, we know it, and BNSF - which operates the line through a purchase-of-service agreement with Metra – knows it. We offer our apologies, but you also want action: BNSF says it is taking a number of steps to address performance issues, including weekly meetings to review delays, address their root causes and implement corrective actions. They are also implementing a freight curfew during rush hours that will lead to fewer interactions between freight and passenger trains. And they are flying dispatchers in from Fort Worth for field trips to get exposure to the commuter operation to enhance their understanding of the suburban trains and the impact of delays on passengers. In addition, the major project to replace 55,000 ties and resurface the rails is coming to an end, and better service will be the result.

Leaky window

For weeks now we have been informing Metra of a leaky window on car 799. It leaks every day and at this point is getting quite annoying that nothing has been done about it. Can someone please address this issue?

Dennis

The window was being fixed the very day you wrote to us.

Restroom renovation

I hope that the revenue from MetraMarket will allow Metra to renovate the restrooms on the Ogilvie concourse. I can only speak for the men's room, but it's outdated, dingy and quite gross.

Danny

You've probably noticed by now that the restrooms were renovated and are reopened.