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Rising gas price, job growth spurring Tri-Rail ridership gains

By Ashley D. Torres

An improving job market and rising gas prices have sent Tri-Rail ridership climbing, with weekday double-digit increases.

Total Tri-Rail ridership, despite a slight drop in December, has consistently risen year-over-year since August, according to monthly reports from Tri-Rail's operator, the South Florida Regional Transportation Authority.

With commuters accounting for nearly 60% of public transportation trips, said Virginia Miller, American Public Transportation Association's media relations senior manager, employment growth increases ridership.

Miami-Dade County's unemployment rate dipped for the first time since 2007 in January to 13.3% from 13.4% in December 2010, according to the county's Office of Economic Development and International Trade. In addition, Miami-Dade employment grew by nearly 4,000 from December to January while the labor force grew by over 3,000.

Tri-Rail's weekday ridership in January climbed 12.1% year over year, to 273,718 passengers compared to January 2010's 244,217. The rail line also saw a year-over-year rise in February's weekday ridership to 282,179 riders from 256,199 in February 2010.

The authority joins 12 national transit systems, including Florida's Central Florida Regional Transportation Authority and Hillsborough Area Regional Transit, to report double-digit passenger increases in February.

Tri-Rail links 18 stations along a 70.9-mile line from Palm Beach County to Miami with trains running from 4 a.m. to 11:30 p.m. weekdays, 7 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekends. It was founded in 1987 as a temporary service while I-95 was widened, then stayed on and grew.

Although national transit ridership numbers aren't yet tabulated for the first quarter, Ms. Miller said, 30 transit systems reported passenger rises in January, February or both in a transportation association informal survey.

The recent rise in gas prices has also fueled the ridership hike, said Bonnie Arnold, the authority's marketing director, as many commuters hold a "\$4 threshold mentality."

The nation's average gasoline price the week ending March 28 was \$3.60, 4 cents above the prior week and an 80-cent spike over the same week in 2010, according to the US Energy Information Administration's This Week in Petroleum.

Gas prices, noted Robert Cruz, county chief economist, are set by oil companies based on petroleum cost and world supply and demand. With unrest continuing in the Middle East, spikes in the price of oil, amidst concerns over potential supply disruption, mean rising gasoline prices for consumers.

When gas prices spike, public transportation becomes conscious consumers' alternative, saving individuals \$9,904 annually, according to the transportation association's report based on the March 4 average gas price. The report ranked Miami 16th for savings to users, \$9,781 a year.

Historically, Ms. Arnold said, when gas prices fall Tri-Rail has lost some ridership but doesn't reach previous lows.

In the fall of 2008, when gas prices dropped from roughly \$4, 10 transit systems recorded their highest passenger counts, including Tri-Rail, which reported its highest ridership of 400,808 in October 2008.

Advocates attribute rider retention to commuters recognizing benefits of public transportation, which include savings, a less stressful commute, less gas consumed, more free time and carbon footprint reduction.

Transit ridership is expected to keep rising with hikes in gas prices.

For Tri-Rail, the added connection to Miami International Airport with completion of the Miami Intermodal Center in 2013 is also geared to add more passengers.