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METROLINK

Mass transit's mass appeal

More passengers

Ridership this year is expected to rise by 32 percent from 2006.

More opportunities

Developers are locating their new projects near the line.

By Riddhi Trivedi-St. Clair

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

The developers of NorthPark, a 550-acre office, industrial and retail development near Lambert Field, figure they have a competitive edge. Less than a mile away, at Hanley Road and Interstate 70, is a MetroLink station.

And the developers have pledged \$3 million toward a new MetroLink station planned for the project site.

"I enjoy telling people we will be served by two MetroLink stations," said Chris McKee, president of McEagle Properties, one of the developers. "I really see it as a competitive advantage."

Developers besides McKee, whose company is based in O'Fallon, Mo., are pitching proximity to MetroLink as a bonus for tenants. Projects worth about \$750 million are being built or planned near

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Mass transit's mass appeal

○ MetroLink stations. More are in the works on both sides of the Mississippi, as developers capitalize on heightened interest in mass transit.

In April, almost 81,000 people rode the light-rail system every day, up from 65,663 in April 2006. Ridership was projected to exceed 86,000 daily passengers by 2020, but that should happen by 2010, said Larry Salci, Metro's president and chief executive.

Nearly 21.9 million riders are expected to use MetroLink this year, a 32 percent increase over the almost 16.6 million last year.

The addition last August of the 8.2-mile cross county extension from Forest Park to Clayton and Shrewsbury, along with realigning the bus routes that feed MetroLink, has helped to increase ridership, Salci said.

"Connectivity is what was missing before," he said.

As a result, Salci said, more developers are working with MetroLink to create mixed-use developments — those that include offices, retail and residential components — with access to public transportation.

"MetroLink is becoming a marketing tool," Salci said.

It was for NorthPark, as developers tried to attract the national headquarters and main campus of Vatterott College from St. Ann. They succeeded, and construction has started.

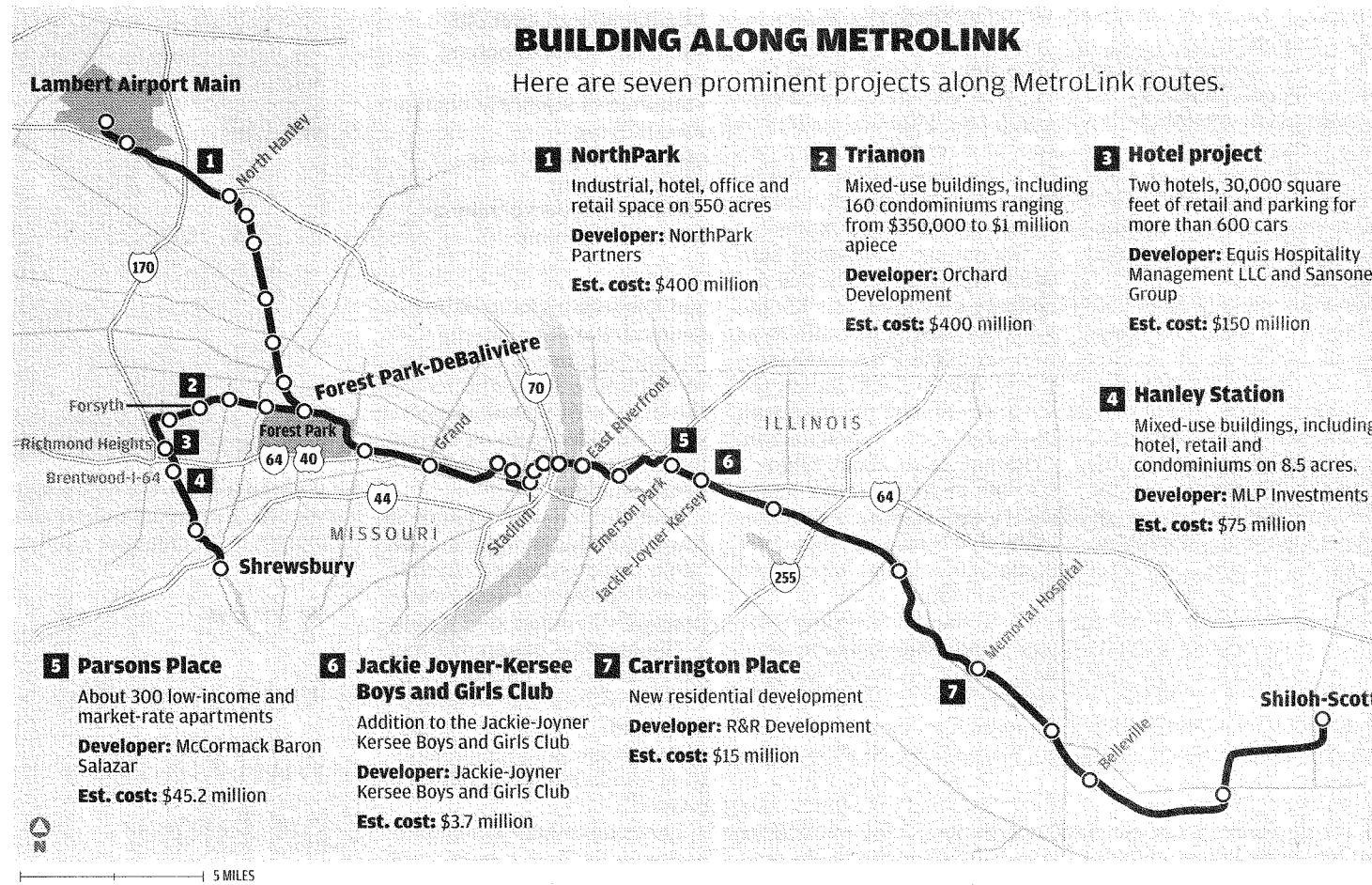
Proximity to mass transit is an important factor for the college, said Vince Vatterott, senior vice president for Clayton-based Michelson Commercial Realty and Development. Vatterott, who brokered the deal, is not connected to the college.

The college's students often lack cars or cannot afford high gas prices, Vatterott said.

CONVENIENCE

"If they don't have a car and can't use mass transit, they can't get to class," he said. "Having MetroLink access was a key element in the choice of the location."

The light-rail system also is getting attention from people such as Ryan Wachter who may not need to use it daily but find it



A train passes Hanley Station, where a condo development is under way. Kevin Manning | Post-Dispatch

a convenient alternative to cars.

Wachter, 27, is buying a condo at Hanley Station, a 150-condo development being built in Brentwood, less than two blocks from the MetroLink station.

A consultant for KPMG who travels a lot, Wachter lived close to the Forsyth station in Clayton and found himself using MetroLink a few times a week to get to his office, to baseball games and to the airport. "I really learned to use it as a secondary means of transportation," he said.

Once he moves into his new condo, Wachter probably will use MetroLink more than ever, he said.

"I was looking for convenience, and being centrally located like that, I can use Metro to get to wherever I want to go, Clayton, Shrewsbury, Maplewood."

Andrew Checkley, project manager for Hanley Station, said: "Projects like Hanley Station are about the lifestyle, and a big piece of that is transportation. It is one of the major topics of discussion with potential residents."

The growing use of mass transit does not suggest that it is going to replace driving, said Jay Case, principal of Chicago-based Orchard Development, which is building Trianon, a \$150 million mixed-use project in Clayton.

"It is an added amenity, something to supplement their lifestyle," Case said. "Even if people use their cars 15 to 20 percent less, it will be a tremendous asset to everyone."

People are using MetroLink already, and if you put a development near a station, more will,

he said.

"It's like in the old days when development was centered around highway hubs," Case said. "Now it is mass transit. We want people to understand and appreciate public transportation as an added amenity."

Trianon's marketing materials tout it as a "Transit Oriented Development," capitalizing on its location near the Forsyth MetroLink station.

Such developments are cropping up all over the nation, said Thomas Bisacchino, president of the National Association of Industrial and Office Properties.

"People will pay a premium to be in a good-size mixed-use infill project with access to mass transit," he said.

LOW-COST HOUSING

Aging baby boomers are choosing to live in the urban core rather than in isolated single-family homes in the suburbs. And developers of mixed-use infill projects — which crop up in open pockets of land in otherwise developed areas — are having success marketing to that group.

Developers need to turn their attention to lower-cost housing — providing housing for people most likely to use mass transit,

Bisacchino said.

"A lot of the first wave of such residential development has been pretty high-end," he said. "We need to bring more affordable housing to the urban core, housing for the people who use mass transit."

Some already have. There has been growth in affordable housing developments in the Metro East area, including the \$45 million Parsons Place development in East St. Louis. St. Louis-based developer McCormack Baron Salazar chose the site because of its proximity to MetroLink, and many of the units are being set aside for lower-income tenants.

St. Louis-based Citizens for Modern Transit, a mass transit advocacy group, says that about a half-billion dollars in public and private investment has been generated along a MetroLink extension in St. Clair County since it opened in 2001.

In addition, Swansea is working on a downtown development plan centered around MetroLink. Belleville is trying to spur residential development around the Scheel Street station.

On the Missouri side of the river, the Highway 40 (Interstate 64) reconstruction and impending road closures have created a greater awareness about public transportation, and it is much higher on people's priority lists, Hanley Station's Checkley said.

Despite that, Metro officials need to create greater public awareness, said Mike Mullenix, chairman and chief executive of Equis Hospitality. His company plans to open two hotels on Clayton Road in Richmond Heights.

While Mullenix wants his staff to direct guests to the nearby MetroLink station, Mullenix acknowledges that he knows little himself about routes and times.

"I don't think we do a good enough job of explaining to the public where (MetroLink) goes and what it does," Mullenix said. "It's a great thing, but we need more public awareness."

He suggested that all developers be provided MetroLink information packets as part of commercial permit documents and that Metro officials hold information sessions educating developers about MetroLink and its advantages.

Mullenix said, "They should encourage developers to sell MetroLink as an amenity in their projects."

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