



STAY BEHIND THE YELLOW LINE



# TRANSITIONING TO TRANSIT

As the Gold Line continues its march east, the new Metro stations are anchoring thriving, mixed-use communities providing comfortable mid- to high-density living with easy access to multiple restaurants and services.

STORY BY // **NADINE ONO** IMAGES BY // **HAYDEN BERGER**

↳ **IT'S A WEDNESDAY EVENING AT THE DEL MAR STATION** AND COMMUTERS ARE DEPARTING METRO GOLD LINE TRAINS HEADED UP TO THEIR APARTMENTS JUST ABOVE THE TRACKS, TO THEIR CARS IN THE PARKING LOT BELOW OR TO MEET FRIENDS FOR HAPPY HOUR AT THE OTIS BAR. THE STATION'S COURTYARD IS A FLURRY OF ACTIVITY AS COMMUTERS MIX WITH LOCALS AT THIS VIBRANT TRANSIT COMMUNITY.

Del Mar Station is one of several transit communities along the Metro Gold Line's route, which currently runs from East Los Angeles to Pasadena through Downtown Los Angeles. These mixed-use communities often have mid- to high-density residential and commercial components as well as parking for commuters who don't live within the complex. The transit communities along the Metro Gold Line have changed the way residents in Pasadena and the San Gabriel Valley live, move, eat and seek entertainment.

Christine Hall and her husband moved to the Avalon Apartments in the Del Mar Station three years ago from Whittier because they were looking for a more "walkable" community. "With Del Mar Station, we just couldn't beat the location, it just seemed like it was central to walk to everything that we knew we would take advantage of," says Hall.

Southern California generally isn't known for its pedestrian culture or easy access to

public transportation. Many people don't think twice about hopping in their cars to go somewhere close. But as freeway traffic worsens, concerns about the environment grow and the region's population rises, it was clear there needed to be a change.

Foothill Gold Line CEO Habib Balian says the idea of the Metro Gold Line started decades ago. "It took many years for it to take hold, but by 1999, we were under construction from Union Station to Pasadena and the City of Pasadena was way ahead of the curve because they have been thinking about this for the last decade."

Early on in the process, the City of Pasadena worked to create the Holly Street Village transit community at the Memorial Station in Old Pasadena. The city vacated a street and the old police station, demolished a fire station and used eminent domain for the air space above the light rail tracks in order to connect the apartments to Memorial Park.

According to Eric Duyshart, Economic Development Manager for the City of Pasadena, it was a bold move, "A lot of credit goes to the city for pushing that project because that was really the first one. And when that project was built, knowing that light rail was going to come in another four or five years, freight trains were going through there." Duyshart adds that, even with freight trains, people were willing to pay premium rents. The investment community took notice, which paved the way for further development of the transit communities.

The initial phase of the Metro Gold Line opened between Union Station and Sierra Madre Villa in 2003, on the former right-of-way of the Atchison Topeka and the Santa Fe railway, which carried freight and Amtrak trains. Longtime residents might remember that it sometimes took as long as 30 minutes for a train to pass through an intersection.

Del Mar Station started as an abandoned 1935 train depot and the surrounding land. Balian explains, "It was a true joint venture between the City of Pasadena, the Gold Line, Metro and this developer to take this land that could have just been a surface lot." Working together, all four entities were able to build an



underground lot, the residential component and the restaurant and retail space.

Retired Amtrak executive Bruce Heard, who also serves on the Metro San Gabriel Valley Service Council, has a special place in his heart for the old train depot, "I feel fiercely protective of that building and the lovely architecture." He followed the site's development, which included the station's dismantling and move to Central Park for several years during construction. He's happy with the results, "It's a miracle that the station is there and it's so very successful. It was moved back, all five pieces and it was glued together and it became the restaurant that it is today." In fact, there is a vintage menu from the Amtrak days hanging inside La Grande Orange Café as a tribute to the building's past.

For Del Mar Station and other transit communities, it was important to include a commercial aspect. At Del Mar, besides La Grande Orange Café and The Otis Bar, there is The Luggage Room Pizzeria, the Stone Brewery tasting room, Sushi Kimaguri, Ballard's Artwork Framing and a Pasadena Police Department Substation.

LGO Hospitality owns La Grande Orange Café, The Luggage Room Pizzeria and The Otis Bar which all occupy the old depot.



According to company Founder and President Bob Lynn, putting the restaurants at the station was a leap of faith. "The train station is such a fantastic building and opportunity, that I think a lot of people questioned it. When we opened, the [Gold] line had just basically started going and there weren't a lot of people riding it at first."

His patience has been rewarded because as ridership increased and the apartments at the station started filling up, the restaurant became a meeting place said Lynn, "For a lot of them [apartment residents], we're kind of their kitchen. It's funny, because they come down and they use it all the time to grab a pizza or go to happy hour."

Hall agreed, "We have La Grande Orange downstairs, which is wonderful food and people. I feel if we're going to go somewhere else, we're going to get good food, but it would be like strangers serving us." She added, "We know the manager, we see the servers, we see pictures of babies, or wedding pictures, it's been a great experience getting to know the local establishments and the people that work there."

In time, the local community, in addition to the commuters and apartment residents, has made both LGO restaurants very popular as evidenced by the crowds of people waiting to be seated on any given night. Lynn added, "Our goal has really been to be the community restaurant, whether it's your son's birthday or you want to take Grandma out for her 80th, because it's such a special building and all of the history there."

Further up the line is the Sierra Madre Villa Station, which has a different twist. Not only does it have a residential component and is a close walk to restaurants and retail, but it also houses the A Noise Within Theatre, which performs and promotes classical theatre to not only theatregoers, but about 10,000 students yearly.

"We were fortunate to get A Noise Within to Pasadena," says Duyshart. "They came here because we've got such a culturally-rich community, with so many nice amenities and so many people supporting the arts. They saw a value in being out in East Pasadena in a very interesting building and having the rail as an amenity."



Co-Producing Artistic Director Julia Rodriguez-Elliott agrees, “Certainly, the fact that the Gold Line lies in close proximity to our facility was central to the decision to come to this particular location in Pasadena.” In 2011, the company moved from Glendale to the newly built 283-seat theater, which also includes a learning resource center open to all teachers and students.

Being located within the Sierra Madre Villa transit community has perks for both the theater and the apartment residents according to Rodriguez-Elliott, “We are proud to outreach to our neighbors and are delighted that they enjoy our shows at A Noise Within.” The theatre also encourages patrons who don’t live within walking distance to use the Gold Line when attending plays.

Soon, A Noise Within will be able to expand their audience yet again as Metro Gold Line hit another milestone by completing construction of the Foothill Gold Line extension from the Sierra Madre Villa station through Monrovia, Arcadia and Duarte and ending at Citrus College in Azusa. The line will start service on March 5, 2016.

“Monrovia is probably the one that’s the next one to go, I can actually see construction within the next six to eight months,” says Balian about the new transit communities on the extension route. “But you’re going to see a lot of that around each of these stations.”

The City of Monrovia has plans for its Metro Gold Line station in hopes of revitalizing the immediate area. “We have a shortage of open space, particularly in that part of town,” says Steve Sizemore, Community Development Director for the City of Monrovia. “We see this as kind of a foundation to bring people into Monrovia then move them up into Old Town, into our restaurants and shops there—get off the train and shop in Monrovia.”

Sizemore predicts that the Monrovia station will also be a mixed-use transit community with residential, office space and retail. “You’ll see neighborhood services that will service the people who work and live in that area. And then there will be entertainment uses and

eating uses that people will be drawn into from the outside.” Like Del Mar Station, Monrovia has a historic train depot (built in 1926) that the city would like to preserve and convert to a commercial property, such as a restaurant.

Next year, not only will the Gold Line Foothill Extension start service, but the Expo Line to Santa Monica will as well, making it possible to travel from the San Gabriel Valley to Santa Monica by light rail. “You’re going to have all these destinations at your fingertips. On Saturday, maybe you’ll want to go to Santa Monica. I live in Pasadena and you won’t catch me in that traffic, but now I wouldn’t think twice about it, get on the train,” says Balian.

And, as the start of service for the Gold Line Foothill Extension nears, so will the opportunities for people to live in cities they never thought about before because the rush hour drive was too long. Balian sums it up, “Rail will bring opportunities for people to come and live in Pasadena, work downtown or work other places. Very soon you will be able to live in Azusa and come to Pasadena to work or vice versa, so there are a lot more opportunities that this line brings.”

Today, the Metro Gold Line carries a diverse group of people—not just

commuters—between Pasadena and Downtown L.A. Teens hop on the train at South Pasadena to explore different parts of Pasadena or Little Tokyo and sports fans use the Metro Gold Line to get to Staples Center for a hockey or basketball game. If you live in East Pasadena, it may be easier to park at Sierra Madre Villa Station and take the train into Old Pasadena for dinner or to South Pasadena on Thursday nights for the weekly farmer’s market.

Balian, who grew up in Pasadena is amazed at what has been achieved, “As a resident, I never thought I would see it, I never thought it would be as popular as it is.” Ridership on the Metro Gold Line is exceeding forecasts at 42,000 rides a day and it is expected to increase by 10,000-15,000 when the extension starts service.

The transit communities and the Metro Gold Line will truly be a success when they become part of everyday life for the region’s residents. It appears that is already happening according to Lynn, “We’ve got a lot of the locals who live in Pasadena who will come to the restaurant, jump on the light rail, go to a Dodgers game, come back, stop and have a pizza, or dinner. So there’s really a great kind of accessibility that it’s created in a bunch of different directions.” 🍕

