Campus Access Improves, but Beware of Headaches Ahead

The addition of a new bus route and the upcoming completion of a major highway upgrade promises to improve access to the rapidly expanding Anschutz Medical Campus and nearby destinations. But bigger long-term projects will probably mean another long-running round of headaches for campus motorists.

The new year began with the addition of a new RTD bus route linking the Stapleton neighborhood to campus. Route 89, which began service Jan. 6, runs between the Stapleton Park-n-Ride at 36th Avenue and Central Park Boulevard and 16th Avenue and Quentin Street, just west of the hospital, weekdays from 6 a.m. to 9:30 p.m.

The additional route is the first RTD has put in place since University of Colorado Hospital completed its move to the Anschutz Medical Campus in June 2007. It’s part of a larger long-term RTD plan that will link the campus to the I-225 Light Rail Line, currently under construction and slated to begin service in the spring of 2016.

The eight-stop, 10.5-mile I-225 line from the Nine Mile Park-n-Ride to Smith Road and Peoria Street includes stations at Colfax Avenue and Fitzsimons Parkway and at Ursula Street and Montview Boulevard on the east and north sides of campus, respectively.

The Smith Road/Peoria Street terminal will hook up with the East Rail Line linking Union Station downtown and Denver International Airport. Route 89, in turn, will connect to the East Rail Line at the Stapleton Park-n-Ride.

They’ve come, so build it. The new bus route and light rail expansion show that RTD has made the campus “a destination,” said Jeff Thompson, director of Government and Corporate Relations for University of Colorado Health. But he cautioned that drivers will probably have to endure plenty of obstacles and detours before the light rail work is finished.

One significant problem, Thompson said, is the light rail work will at some point require major construction along Montview Boulevard, the extensive east-west thoroughfare on the north side of campus. The work includes relocating existing infrastructure, such as water and sewer lines.

Tina Jaquez, a public information project manager for Kiewit-Turner, which is building the I-225 Light Rail Line, said the Montview construction is slated to begin this summer, with the Fitzsimons/Colfax work to begin in the fall. Start dates for both locations are subject to change, she added.

"There will inevitably be disruptions to traffic," Thompson said of the light rail construction. The Montview construction will have the greatest impact on the University of Colorado, which operates several parking lots along Montview and 19th Avenue.

The exits give motorists a welcome alternative to the frequently jammed Colfax Avenue exits and on-ramps from and to I-225.

Stop sign at Fitzsimons. Meanwhile, the Colorado Department of Transportation plans to complete the northbound I-225 exit to 17th Place on the east edge of campus Feb. 7. The work wraps up a four-stage highway improvement project that broke ground in April 2010. The southbound I-225 exit opened in February 2012.

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“There will now be full access from the highway into and out of campus,” Thompson said.

But there’s a catch, he added. The highway project aimed to reduce congestion along heavily traveled Colfax Avenue, which runs the length of the southern border of campus. But I-225 drivers will arrive at Fitzsimons Parkway and 17th Place, which is closed for...
construction of the new VA Medical Center until at least July 2015, said W. Celeste Davis, Kiewit-Turner’s public information officer for the VA project.

With that route unavailable, drivers exiting the highway from either direction will either have to get to campus via Fitzsimons and the old Colfax nemesis or via Montview – portions of which will be closed during light rail construction.

The impact of the 17th Place and Montview closures will affect university, School of Medicine and research complex staff most significantly, Thompson said. The 400 or so hospital staffers who now park in the Henderson Garage on Montview would have faced changes were they not moving to the new employee/faculty structure at 17th Avenue and Quentin Street in early February.

The hospital plans to keep a close eye on the ever-shifting traffic puzzle, Thompson said.

“There will be much more frequent stakeholder meetings with RTD, and we will attend them,” he promised. “We will have a seat at the table.”