



Wicker Park Station Rehab Experience Shows Power of Transit to Boost Sales

by John Greenfield | December 15, 2014

Stan's Donuts is one of several nearby businesses looking forward to a sales boost when the Damen stop reopens. Image: Google Streetview

The old saying goes, "You don't miss your water 'til your well runs dry." That's been the case with Wicker Park merchants during the two month closure of the O'Hare Branch's Damen station for renovations.

They've learned the hard way how important proximity to transit is to their bottom line. DNAinfo reports that several independent businesses near the Blue Line stop are so relieved that the station will reopen next Monday, December 22, they're offering customers freebies and specials to celebrate.

"We did not realize how much we depend on the traffic, being so close to the station," Ulysses Salamanca, owner of Flash Taco at 1570 North Damen, told DNA. The tacqueria, located just north of the transit hub, will be handing out free tamales during rush hours on the first three days after the station reopens. "There is a great community of Blue Liners, and we want to show gratitude to the commuters," Salamanca said.

Ridership on the O'Hare Branch has risen by 30 percent over the last five years, and the Damen stop handles about 12 million rides a year. It closed on October 20 for renovations as part of the CTA's \$432 million Your New Blue initiative, which includes rehabs to 13 stations.

The \$13.6 million Damen facelift includes the removal of the stop's concession space, which will increase space for customers within the small, crowded station house by 36 percent. The rehab also

includes new platforms, lighting, signs, and bike racks, although the stop won't become wheelchair accessible. An installation by LA-based artist Gaston Noques will be added sometime in 2015.

"Our sales have been down 20 percent since the station closed," Ken Lubinsky of Lubinsky Furniture, located around the corner at 1550 North Milwaukee, told DNA. He said CTA commuters often browse his store after work. If 63 'L' riders – the station closure is lasting 63 days – drop off business cards between December 22 and January 10, the shop will hold a drawing for a free recliner chair.

Scott Starbuck, owner of City Soles shoe store, located north of the station at 1560 North Damen, told DNA he estimates the station shutdown has cost Wicker Park businesses in lost sales during the two months preceding Christmas. The shop is offering a 20 percent discount on footwear between December 22 and 31 for customers who present their Ventra card, and then post a snapshot of themselves wearing their new kicks on social media.

Other nearby businesses offering giveaways to customers who flash a fare card after the station reopens include Stan's Donuts, Glazed and Infused doughnut shop, and La Colombe café. CTA spokeswoman Catherine Hosinsky told DNA that the agency doesn't plan to compensate merchants for lost revenue. "We have seen that the short-term inconvenience of station rehabilitation projects has been more than offset by the long-term economic benefits that modernized stations bring to Chicago's neighborhoods," she said.

The drop in sales for Wicker Park businesses during the rehab underscores the huge potential of rapid transit stops to bring customers to retail districts. Merchants along Ashland Avenue who have been on the fence about whether to support the city's plans for a bus rapid transit line on that street would be wise to take note.