

ANCHOR INTRO: Salt Lake City's TRAX light-rail system, a place where University of Utah students, commuters, and families all share the same space. Alex Hooper takes us onboard to explore what the trains reveal about the city as a whole.

((Scheduled Departure in 5 minutes))

NARRATION: Salt Lake's TRAX trains carry tens of thousands of riders every day across the Salt Lake Valley. From students heading to class, workers commuting from the suburbs, and families running errands. For University of Utah students, the ride is free. It's built into tuition, whether they ride or not. But the people who depend on TRAX the most often aren't just students. So I rode the trains to hear what the system says about the city, and who it's really built for.

((Incoming Train))

NARRATION: At the Trolley Station on the TRAX Red Line, I met Hyunjeong Sin, a University of Utah student who rides TRAX almost every day.

SIN: "Normally I use the TRAX for going to the university, I usually just see the landscape out the windows."

NARRATION: For Sin, the daily commute is a peaceful one. From the Trader Joe's at the Trolley Station, to the Wasatch Mountains that roll by, the free student pass makes a real difference for her.

SIN: "In Korea, we don't have the subway like this, and there's usually no one who checks if we tag our card or not. I almost spent a hundred dollars for transportation, and in Utah, I don't have to pay for that. It's really nice."

NARRATION: Despite this, safety concerns at night are prevalent among student riders, especially those who rely on TRAX because they don't own a car.

SIN: "It was a night, like between 10 and 11pm, there were some homeless people there, and they were screaming and they approached me and my friends, we got off at the next station and got an Uber."

((Train Moving))

NARRATION: For many riders, TRAX isn't just convenient, it's a necessity to their daily commute. One of those riders is Henry Scheuller, a resident of Kaysville, Utah. From the evolving landscapes, to the mix of riders, he's been aboard the train to see it all.

SCHUELLER: “There’s a pretty decent mix. A lot of students, a lot of commuters to work, professionals, people who are busy and need to get places. The Red Line especially gets super busy during those hours.”

NARRATION: But relying on TRAX comes with frustrations that shape the daily experience. He says the system has potential, but it doesn’t always serve riders well.

SCHUELLER: “The hardest part is waiting 15 minutes every time. There are a lot of delays, a lot of times it just stops or doesn’t show up. If the train ran every five minutes, that would be a lot better. Their ticketing is off, it’s unorganized. While it does benefit us sometimes, I’d say it’s a lazy system.”

NARRATION: Still, there are moments on TRAX that capture something essential about Salt Lake City.

SCHUELLER: “When you’re riding in the evening and a bunch of Jazz fans or Mammoth fans get on the train, it warms my heart. Utah is a very trusting society. Most trains in the world, you can’t trust who’s on them. But here, people trust each other. That’s what Salt Lake feels like to me.”

NARRATION: And Scheuller wishes students understood that using TRAX isn’t just about convenience, it’s about navigating a system that thousands depend on every day.

SCHUELLER: “Students are the main demographic, and they need to be the most aware of UTA. The parking situation at the U is the worst thing about the school. You have to be on top of the UTA times and show up five minutes early because that train will just leave you.”

((Campus Traffic Noise))

NARRATION: Back on campus, parking is one of the biggest sources of tension. The University of Utah brings in 32 million dollars a year from parking revenue, including 13-point-5 million dollars from permits and 1-point-8 million dollars from tickets. And the university says parking is only getting tighter as enrollment grows.

WALSH: “Parking has always been a problem, leadership would now say we don’t have a parking problem, we have a scheduling problem.”

NARRATION: Rebecca Walsh is a Public Relations director for the University of Utah. She says even during peak hours on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, there are still about a thousand open stalls. They’re just not where students want them.

WALSH: “If you’re willing to walk a little bit, you can find a parking spot. If you want to be three minutes from your class, you’re going to have a harder time.”

NARRATION: While the argument could be made to simply just build more parking lots, it doesn’t go with the University’s sustainability mission to encourage the use of the TRAX system.

WALSH: “Do we want to encourage single drivers, or do we want to encourage people to use transit and walk and live on campus? We have these conflicting missions. The goal is that those students who live in housing will ride transit and they’ll walk. They won’t have cars.”

((“Next Station”))

NARRATION: For students like Hyunjeong Sin, TRAX is a window into a city she’s still getting to know. For local riders like Henry Scheuller, it’s a representation of the city. And for the University of Utah, it’s a system they’re counting on as the campus grows. Salt Lake’s TRAX trains may run on steel rails, but they also run through the heart of a rapidly developing Salt Lake Valley.

OUTRO: Reporting from Salt Lake City, I’m Alex Hooper.

((Doors Closing))