

Commentary

Get Over This Misguided Love Affair With Trains

■ **Transit:** Buses aren't the solution. In decentralized Los Angeles, we need new roads.

By **JAMES E. MOORE II**

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority's 20-year plan manipulates figures to enhance the appeal of rail, which it calls a critical component of the region's transportation strategy. The plan itself shows that rail investments rank lower than any transit alternative in cost effectiveness. But the MTA continues to treat rail as an alternative that is too important to be compared with such options as peak-period pricing or expanding the bus system.

Part of the answer to the MTA's love affair with rail seems to be policymakers' mistaken belief in the economic importance of traditional downtowns. In fact, the downtown share of jobs has decreased sharply. In the past 10 years, net job growth in the Los Angeles central business district was 8,800, an increase of only 2.5%. During the same period, total regional job growth was 35%.

The MTA's rail plan demonstrates the organization's misunderstanding of the forces driving metropolitan traffic and development trends.

MTA projections that the region's travel speeds will grind to a few miles an hour early in the next century are absurd. Technological change and innovation have helped make suburbanization the nation's

most important congestion relief mechanism. Industry follows the labor force to the suburbs, resulting in shorter commuting times. USC researchers have tracked the evolution of Orange County from a typical bedroom community with a workers-to-jobs ratio of 1.4 to 1 to an employment-intensive region with a workers-to-jobs ratio of almost 1 to 1, nearly identical to that of Los Angeles County. There are always temporary bottlenecks, but corrections are still fairly rapid.

In 1980, only a little more than 7% of the jobs in the country's top 10 urban areas were located downtown. Despite intensive investments in central business districts during the 1980s, their job growth was either very small or negative. All data indicate that, in all economic sectors, most job growth occurs on the urban periphery. These trends and their implications are perhaps most pronounced in Los Angeles.

Rail won't slow the dispersion of employment, and Los Angeles would be worse off if it did. The transportation benefits of suburbanization are demonstrated by almost 20 years of data on trip length and duration from nationwide surveys. Trip times for commuters using private autos in Los Angeles are significantly less than those for the rest of the nation's 10 largest metropolitan areas.

How do we provide public transportation to an area that is decentralizing as rapidly as Los Angeles is? Some elements of the MTA's 20-year plan will help. The plan increases the bus fleet and includes new

technologies such as automatic vehicle identification for tolls and incident-management programs that may expand highway capacity at relatively low cost. Cheaper travel means more trips, so these strategies cannot be expected to reduce congestion. They will, however, make more trips possible at the current level of service. More important, the MTA's new respect for various combinations of high-occupancy vehicle lanes and automatic tolls suggests that the scientific literature is finally beginning to inform transportation policymakers.

In the best case, the MTA's shift toward tolls and technology will improve system management and create new transportation options better suited to a dispersed metropolis. But it may also provide an ocean of new toll revenues to a public agency that has demonstrated a relentless capacity to bankrupt itself on a budget that is approaching \$3 billion a year.

The best use of congestion-toll and toll-road revenues is not, as some suggest, financing new rail systems, nor is it transferring wealth to the poor, who are adversely affected by the regressiveness of road tolls, though such transfers may be a political necessity. The best use of road tolls is for construction of new roads.

James E. Moore II is associate professor of urban and regional planning and civil engineering at USC and co-director of USC's Center for Advanced Transportation Technology.



New Trains vs. New Roads

■ Re "Get Over This Misguided Love Affair With Trains," Commentary, March 20:

Professor James E. Moore II exhibits a dislike of rail that transcends common reason. Where does he intend to place these new roads? What is his suggestion to provide an alternative to the private automobile? Surely Moore is aware that millions of worker-hours are lost to traffic congestion, and that untold billions of dollars in property tax revenues have been lost to the parking lot/freeway mentality of urban planning. The professor claims that rail systems are the least cost-effective method of transit. Does he use figures supplied by the Highway Users Foundation, or does he just rely on the word of the American Trucking Assn.? If Moore were to include lost taxes, lost lives and time, he might see that high-speed rail is the best investment a major city can make.

JON HARTMANN
Los Angeles

■ Moore suggests that the Metropolitan Transit Authority now concentrate more on street construction, to be financed by "an ocean of new toll revenues." Moore candidly admits that the poor "are adversely affected by the regressiveness of road tolls."

We suggest that rather than impose further tax burdens on the poor, further road construction be financed by special benefit assessments on landowners whose land parcels are increased in value by construction of the new roads. Thus a portion of the unearned increment created by spending of public funds would be returned to the public, as an alternative to regressive levies that adversely affect the poor.

STANLEY M. SAPIRO
Malibu

■ I read your story ("Troubled Ride-Sharing Program Near Collapse," March 10) and I had to respond. I am one of the estimated 2 million Southlanders who does not drive alone to work. Commuter Transportation Services helped me discover a car pool, which I used for a few years, and now I ride the train to work.

CTS, a.k.a. Commuter Computer, is the company that posts those familiar little blue ride-share freeway signs that list a phone number for car-pool information.

It's a shame that Caltrans has decided that after 20 years, funding for ride-share programs in Southern California will end. It's a shame that the Herculean task to change commuter behavior in a region that has the perception of being the driving capital of the world is coming to an end. It's a shame that a program that helps ease traffic congestion and clean the air is being dropped, just like that.

P. GUSTAF HIDALGO
Walnut

Los Angeles Times

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GOP

■ The "G" in GOP used to stand for "Grand." These days, it seems to