

OPINION

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LOS ANGELES TIMES

Commentary

Gold Line Is Just Glitter

By JAMES E. MOORE II

Civic-minded rail proponents hope that the new Metro Rail Gold Line will eventually help reconfigure Los Angeles into a network of accessible urban villages dominated by a teeming downtown. This is wishful thinking.

Thirty years of data reveals a boom in both non-work travel and nontraditional commuting patterns. Employment in Los Angeles is dispersing, with local employment centers accounting for a dwindling share of jobs. Los Angeles' 60 miles of rail lines will not reverse the economic forces that drive these trends. In L.A., no rail system ever will.

Civic boosters can be forgiven their daydreams of a socially re-engineered Los Angeles, but the acts of salaried public officials cannot be so easily excused. For the Los Angeles County Transportation Commission and now the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the rail plan is a betrayal of their public trust.

Private firms grow by cutting costs and selling products and services that people want. In public agencies, cost-control leads to smaller budgets. Public agencies often grow by bankrupting themselves with overcommitments, ensuring a continuing need for tax dollars but placing an ever-increasing strain on public revenues.

The MTA's predecessor agency recognized that an expensive rail plan was a superb growth strategy, and it pressed the electorate to tax itself to build rail. Voters were told that a rail system would decongest roads, clean the air and change land uses to provide Los Angeles residents with a pedestrian-friendly lifestyle. These cynical misrepresentations have diverted attention from truly meaningful transit options.

The simple, unfortunate truth is that every mile of track we lay squanders resources that could otherwise produce more mobility for more people. For a fraction of the cost of the Los Angeles rail system, the region could have fielded a vastly better bus system carrying many more passengers.

Rail's perceived advantages result from separating transit vehicles from other traffic. This provides a higher level of service that makes transit a more attractive option for middle- and upper-income riders who have no intention of ever boarding an MTA bus. Unfortunately, most of this untapped transit market will never reside or work in the vicinity of a rail line.

If we are serious about providing transit options with a competitive level of service to everyone, then we will have to recognize that busways offer all of the advantages of rail lines plus lower construction, operating and maintenance costs; greater flexibility because buses can change their routes; and greater capacity than almost any rail line because bus arrivals and departures can be separated by seconds instead of minutes.

An effective bus strategy would require new levels of inter-agency cooperation, and this is possible. The MTA's Metro Rapid buses receive priority access to green lights at many of the Los Angeles Department of Transportation's traffic signals, and Caltrans continues to emphasize adding bus-width, high-occupancy-vehicle lanes — also known as carpool lanes — to freeways. We can go further, including the construction of direct carpool lane connections at freeway interchanges and dedicated, contra-flow bus lanes on city streets that can be changed to coincide with rush hour.

We should also legalize private transit services. Private operators would produce new services attractive to all income groups and exert competitive pressure on the MTA. Placing a mix of private and public transit vehicles on a system of busway and high-occupancy-vehicle lanes would provide transportation options capable of competing with the private automobile.

Los Angeles deserves a high-quality transit system, and it is within our means to provide it. Fortunately, the price we must pay to proceed is relatively low. We have to be willing to learn from our mistakes, the Metro Rail Gold Line included.

James E. Moore II is a professor of industrial engineering, public policy and management and of civil engineering at USC, where he is director of the transportation engineering program.

Commentary

L.A. Needs More Rail Transit

Re "Gold Line Is Just Glitter," Commentary, Aug. 3: It is difficult to know where to begin discussing James E. Moore II's commentary on the Gold Line, especially since it has far more false words than the 16 in President Bush's State of the Union speech.

Anybody who rode the Gold Line on opening weekend and every day since, as I have, is well aware of the thousands of passengers who ride the line daily. The Gold Line travels to Pasadena, where many people happen to work and play. Thus the Gold Line is serving "dispersed employment" and "non-work travel." In the same way, the future Expo Line to Santa Monica will serve the Westside and anybody who enjoys the beach. That's my kind of non-work travel!

The \$1-billion Harbor Freeway busway is an example of the kind of transit Moore is advocating. It carries 3,000 passengers a day (compared to 30,000 along the 105 Freeway-running Green Line), can't change routes unless passengers enjoy sitting in 110 Freeway traffic, and cost more to build than the Gold Line. The San Fernando Valley busway is under construction now; let's build it as rail before we make the same mistake twice.

Moore is right about one thing — the 73-mile Metro Rail system isn't going to solve gridlock. What rail provides is a sec-

ond option to the car. The more rail we build in L.A., the more people have a way to get where they want to go, when they want to. Beach anyone?

PETER CAPONE-NEWTON
Los Angeles

I hate buses. I love the Metro Red Line. I have used it to commute to my work downtown approximately 98% of the time since the day it opened.

As a full-time working mother of a young child, the Red Line gives me a guaranteed 25 minutes to myself when I can read, think and escape the stress of street-level traffic. I disagree with Moore's contention that most of the transit market will never reside or work in the vicinity of a rail line.

When public transportation is good, people will likely reconsider where they work and where they live. One motivating factor in picking my neighborhood is the proximity to the Red Line. I am certain the fixed convenience of light-rail transit will factor into a business' decision on where to locate its offices. I am a convert to public transportation. I may even consider moving to Pasadena one day.

WENDY SHAPERO
Studio City

The diatribe against the Gold Line by Moore certainly displays a dogged consistency. Over the years, his policy regarding public

transportation in Los Angeles can be summed up in a simple mantra. Rubber tires good! Steel wheels bad! This vehemence can't be the result of logic or of studying the transit experience of most of the major cities on the planet. Some childhood trauma must be at work. What's the matter, Mr. Moore? Did your kid brother get the Lionel set instead of you at Christmas?

DONALD A. STANWOOD
Costa Mesa

"New L.A. Rail Line Can Lead to a Golden Future" (Voices, July 26) correctly described the vital role that extending the Gold Line plays in the realization of our regional transit plan for the future of L.A. County. As planning continues on Phase II, extending the Gold Line east to Claremont and San Bernardino County, we also need to aggressively work to extend the Gold Line west into the San Fernando Valley by connecting the Maringo station in Pasadena along the 210 and 134 freeways through Glendale to the Media Center in Burbank and continuing along the 101 Freeway corridor to Ventura County.

This extension will reduce congestion, improve our air quality and provide cost-effective transportation — with less disruption to residents and taxpayer pocketbooks.

MICHAEL D. ANTONOVICH
L.A. County Supervisor