

## THE STATE

# The MTA's Obsession With Rail Knows No Bounds

By James E. Moore II  
and Peter Gordon

The livelihood and welfare of too many households are at stake for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority to continue to indulge its taste for denial. The MTA board's reluctance to back away from its expensive rail mistakes is costing the agency an important opportunity to refocus its service strategy and regain credibility. This is not an opportunity the agency or the region can afford to miss.

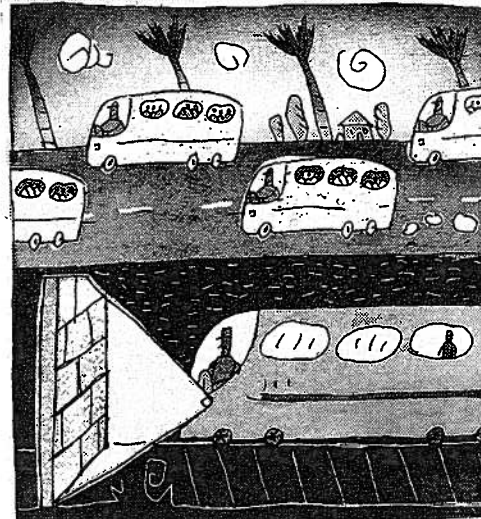
When half-cent sales taxes for transportation squeaked by in 1980 and 1990, the L.A. County Transportation Commission interpreted voters' willingness to tax themselves for better transit service as nothing less than an ironclad mandate for rail. The promises the commission made to secure this mandate were mostly unburdened by facts. Rail was falsely sold to the electorate as the best means to clean the air and decongest roads. It was

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nonsensically sold as a system for everyone's neighbor, one that others would use instead of freeways.

Ten years later, after \$7 billion has been spent, the population has grown by 12% and cumulative net transit boardings have fallen by nearly a billion, the electorate is a little tougher to fool. As costs and unkept promises have mounted, the commission's successor agency, the MTA, has become much more selective in the way it spins the will of the voters. Passage of Proposition A last November was widely described in the press as the end of subways in Los Angeles. In truth, Proposition A is a relatively weak measure that merely prohibits the MTA from spending sales-tax revenues on new subways once the Red Line's North Hollywood extension is completed next year. In the best case, the MTA will use the proposition as an excuse to back away from its rail plan. The more likely scenario, regrettably, is that the MTA will circumvent the public will by issuing subway-construction bonds against revenue sources other than sales taxes.

The MTA demonstrates even less respect for the will of the court. In 1994, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund sued the MTA on behalf of the Bus Riders Union and other plaintiffs. The NAACP contended that the MTA's expen-



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sive rail plans were consuming an enormous share of agency resources and reducing travel opportunities for the great majority of its patrons. A disproportionate share of these riders, the civil-rights organization argued, are members of federally protected groups and that this made the MTA's rail plans a violation of federal civil rights law. In a 1996 court settlement, the MTA agreed to improve the quality of its bus services to meet specific targets. A special master with authority to define actions needed to assure the MTA's compliance with the terms of the settle-

ment was appointed later by the court.

But last week, the MTA was back in court contending that the special master, Donald T. Bliss Jr., and the federal courts lack the authority to enforce the consent decree. After the Bus Riders Union established that the MTA has not sufficiently relieved overcrowding on its buses, Bliss directed the transit agency to remedy the problem by purchasing and operating 481 new buses. The MTA board refused, contending that the special master had no authority to impose such a requirement. The MTA appealed to U.S. District Judge Terry J. Hatter Jr., even as it disputed his authority to enforce the consent decree, complaining that spending the \$363 million needed to obey Bliss would effectively destroy the agency's rail plans.

Of course it would. This is the whole point. This is why the consent decree was a victory for the Bus Riders Union—and for the region. Any realistic review of resources makes it clear that obeying the terms of the agreement means the end of rail construction in Los Angeles.

Fortunately, Hatter applied a dose of reality last week when he ruled that he and Bliss can order the MTA to live up to its promises. Unfortunately, acknowledging reality is not the MTA's strong suit. It would rather pretend that providing more rail service does not mean less bus service.

But the agency's reluctance to abide by the court's ruling reveals the true magnitude of this trade-off. The agency can't afford to meet the terms of the consent decree without gutting its rail plans, and the MTA cannot afford to revive the bus system while constructing and operating a capital-intensive rail system.

The courts are not the most desirable forum in which to formulate public policy, but they play a key role in protecting the electorate from lawmakers' failures. The MTA board has failed both as an executive and a legislative body, turning its back on the county's working poor and other low-income residents. Even with the billions already spent on rail, transit ridership is down by 25% from its 1985 peak. Bus ridership is down by one-third. This trend is the direct result of constructing a rail system that carries far fewer people far fewer miles at a far higher cost than did bus services the MTA has curtailed.

Building more rail lines—to North Hollywood, to Pasadena, to the San Fernando Valley, or to the Eastside—will only make matters worse. It won't matter if the right way is light rail or a subway, or if the trains are full. The net result will still be fewer total transit trips and more billions of dollars wasted. The mathematics are simple, even if the politics are not. □