

Legacy

► In this weekly feature, we excerpt material that has appeared in previous years on the editorial pages.

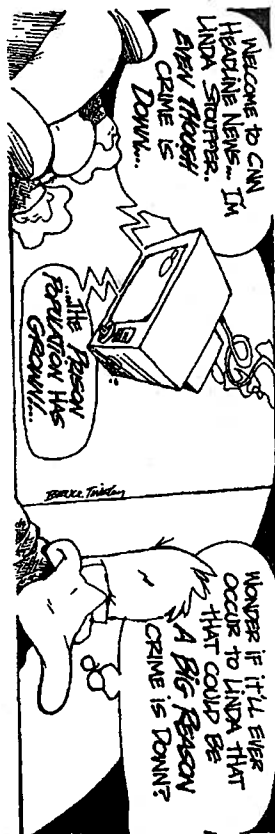
To have the president of the United States accept an honorary post at the head of the Bill of Rights celebration to be held December 15 for the 150th celebration of the Bill of Rights is a mockery and a farce. If there has been anybody in the United States who has helped destroy the Bill of Rights it is President Roosevelt. It will be remembered that he wrote

to members of Congress not to let their doubts as to the constitutionality of the proposed coal legislation interfere with their voting for the measure.

Practically every bill that the administration has sponsored is in violation of the principles of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Instead of making everybody equal before the law, practically all his legislation has tried to make government officials the arbiters and dictators in determining what each man shall receive.

R.C. Hoiles, Sept. 19, 1941

MALLARD FILLMORE



READER REBUTTALS: PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

The numbers for urban rail transit just don't add up

CTA predicts the proposed 28-mile Orange County light-rail transit line would carry 55,000 to 65,000 daily one-way trips at a capital cost of \$1.4 billion to \$1.8 billion. But it is a good bet that OCTA's cost and ridership forecasts are optimistic, just like every other U.S. urban rail forecast put forward over the past 25 years to help justify local authorities' requests for rail construction funds.

Consider some points that the advocates cannot seem to address. Public transit in the United States continues to be a declining industry. U.S. transit trips per capita are now at a historic low, despite more than \$350 billion in public subsidies since the 1960s. Clearly, the wrong projects have been built.

In 1995, transit's market share of total person-trips was just 1.8 percent, slightly more than school buses (1.7 percent) but much less than walking (5.4 percent). Transit commuting in the nation's 33 largest metropolitan areas fell from 14.3 percent in 1960 to 5.7 percent in 1990, and 4.2 percent of the 1990 figure is accounted for by New York-area transit users. Between 1985 and 1995, the 50 largest transit systems in the United States lost 14.5 percent of their annual ridership. The biggest losers included those systems operating in what have long been regarded as traditional urban forms with built-in markets for transit: New York Transit Au-

thority lost 26.8 percent of total boardings. The Chicago Transit Authority lost 31.2 percent. Philadelphia's SEPTA lost 16.3 percent. The San Francisco Bay Area's AC Transit lost 14.9 percent.

Public transit is the most subsidized and least efficient mode. The U.S. Department of Transportation's latest highway cost-allocation study found that the ratio of user-fee payments from autos, pickups and vans accounted for 70-90 percent of the highway costs allocated to passenger use. This includes costs charged to all levels of government. In contrast the overall average subsidy per transit boarding (1994) was almost 75 percent of cost, riders pay 25 percent of costs.

Rail transit investments have accelerated these trends. The ten U.S. cities that added light-rail transit in recent years experienced an aggregate system-wide loss of boardings. Only four of these systems experienced ridership gains. With the exception of San Diego, these gains were all very small and very far below agency projections. Almost all of San Diego's gains are on one line, the Tijuana Trolley, which caters to tourists and residents of Mexico. Low rail ridership plus large construction and operating cost overruns add up to very high costs per rail passenger trip.

One U.S. Department of Transportation study found that costs per boarding ranged from \$5.06 to \$16.77 (1988 dollars). Costs per new transit trip (each and every

trip) averaged almost \$20. High rail costs have routinely driven transit agencies to cannibalize their bus systems, causing systemwide transit service to deteriorate. These cities' poorest residents are the ones hurt the most.

There are few winners. Former auto users account for only 10 percent to 25 percent of the few U.S. riders who use these new rail systems. Given new rails' low ridership, these numbers are too small to impact highway congestion, air quality or anything else.

The market for urban land is producing land use arrangements rail cannot serve. Between 1985 and 1995, most job growth was in rural areas. Suburban growth has long exceeded central city growth. The outer suburbs and rural areas now grow fastest. The farther from the center, the greater the growth. The fastest growing areas are least amenable to inflexible rail transit systems. The areas that transit once served best, the big-city downtowns, show little or no job growth.

Flexible land market allows most people to make location adjustments to avoid very long commutes. In 1990, just 12.5 percent of commuters had travel times longer than 45 minutes. Similar trends can be seen in much of Europe, even in Germany, where there are tough policies to "get people out of their cars."

Sprawl is apparently the traffic solution, not the problem. Average commuting

speeds across all modes continue to rise. The 1995 U.S. average was 33.6 mph, 20 percent above 1983's average of 28 mph. Most commuting is now suburb-to-suburb on less congested roads. The widely reported congestion indices calculated by the Texas Transportation Institute cannot account for the critical redistribution of traffic patterns that is under way.

The preference for personal transportation is powerful, universal and quite understandable. Still, transit service can be configured to take note of drivers' preferences. Buses are higher capacity than railways because buses can be separated by seconds instead of minutes. Busway construction costs per passenger trip are between 10 percent and 20 percent that of light-rail. Light-rail transit is usually not grade-separated, and slower than buses on grade-separated busways. Much of busways' speed advantage stems from the fact that they allow a more flexible service. Buses on busways can be their own feeder service, requiring fewer transfers.

If public authorities insist on continuing to control the market for transit by excluding private operators, then transit agencies have a civic and moral responsibility to transit users and to taxpayers to provide as much service as possible by fielding a cost-effective system. This means avoiding rail and the Los Angeles-style distortions necessary to sell the rail transit option to the electorate.



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POPULATION THE GREATER!



READER REBUTTALS: PUBLIC TRANSPORTATION

Two sides of the track

A conservative's case for light rail in Orange County



TODD SPITZER
Mr. Spitzer, the 2nd District Orange County supervisor and a director of the Orange County Transportation Authority, responds to editorial writer Steve Greenhut's Sept. 5 Commentary "O.C.'s Money Train: How far will we ride the light rail boondoggle?"

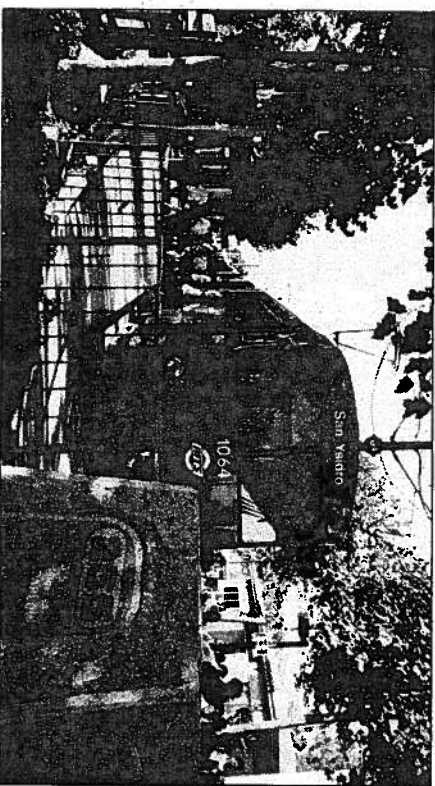
Conservative elected officials such as myself have repeatedly questioned the efficiency of light rail systems such as OCTA's proposed \$1.4 billion CenterLine system between Fullerton and Irvine. I have questioned the efficacy of that large a public investment in rail because, unlike most regions that currently have it, Orange County has no major downtown or central business district.

Ridership is expected to be 60,000 persons per day or only 1 percent of the freeway traffic, and taxpayers will have to subsidize each fare by about 50 percent. Presently there is no plan to replace already scarce traffic lanes displaced by rail and the cost of right-of-way for lane replacement could make the project cost prohibitive. We also need more than \$700 million in federal funding, none of which has yet to be secured. Some of us believe that OCTA can neither build nor maintain such a system without continuing Measure M, and many have noted that I was the only OCTA board member present to vote against supporting continuation of that half-cent sales tax until 2032.

Why then move forward with what critics are already calling the "money train" and the "tram-scam"? In December, I will join my colleagues on the OCTA Board of Directors in making the difficult decision whether we should give a green light for a \$30 million final design/engineering study for the 28-mile rail system.

While Register editorial writer Steven Greenhut believes such a decision is a fait accompli with the OCTA Board ["O.C.'s Money Train," Commentary, Sept. 5], I believe my colleagues are indeed wrestling with the pros and cons of rail while at the same time we attempt to responsibly plan Orange County's transportation system to meet the region's growing demand into the next century.

At a recent debate on light rail sponsored by OCTA and UCI's School of Social Ecology, I was struck by the points of both sides. There are the "cement-heads" who conclude that light rail's costs could never justify its marginal congestion relief benefits and that cars and more roads, thank you, are just fine. The "steel-heads" on the other hand, believe that alternative modes of transportation—despite large costs—



The San Diego Trolley is considered a relative financial success among metro rail systems, largely because of its heavily used Tijuana segment.

are needed to get us out of our cars and eventually, through the redevelopment of our "closer to work" north county cities with more dense housing, entice us out of our suburban-sprawl neighborhoods.

Only one panelist—former Costa Mesa Mayor Peter Buffa—honed in on what I believe is the central question for Orange County for which the "cement-heads" have no solution: If we cannot continually widen our freeways while the population and workforce continue to grow, is it in our best interest to offer alternate modes of public transportation if we are to have any hope of moving people to employment and tourism centers for the next 100 years?

When one talks about government in these terms—using taxpayers' money to change human behavior—conservatives rightfully cringe and libertarians scream "social engineering." While the expected reaction for most conservatives then would be to oppose the project, rail is picking up support. One prominent rail supporter is Paul Weyrich, whose conservative credentials are unquestioned. He helped found the Moral Majority and the Heritage Foundation and was one of Ronald Reagan's earliest supporters. Weyrich is an ardent proponent of rail and also participated in the recent debate

Knight-Ridder photo

on light rail at UCI. In his May 1999 study "Does Transit Work? A Conservative Reappraisal," Weyrich points out that rail and other forms of public transit should be evaluated on their ability to capture "transit competitive trips." Under this concept, transit is judged by its impact in areas only where service is available, where transit is of a high quality, and where the type of trip is one for which public transit is feasible. He advocates this theory to rebut "cement-heads" who quote rail as only mitigating 1 percent of "total trips."

To quote Weyrich, "Measuring transit by counting trips it cannot compete for is like asking how much orange juice you can get from a bushel of apples." Is this practical or simply academic? According to Weyrich, rail works when it's readily available, is of high quality and when it is safe and free from crime. People will choose to get out of their cars and take the train when quality transit service is readily convenient and safe. Weyrich points to rail successes in Chicago, San Diego and in St. Louis. All three cities have made major investments in rail.

More than half of all trips taken to Chicago's downtown area are taken aboard Metra. What is surprising is that more than 85 percent of Metra's riders have a

car available. Rider fares recover 58 percent of Metra's costs. San Diego has also been quite successful with its trolley system. Ridership has consistently exceeded projections and in 1997 the Trolley carried more than 19.5 million passengers; 41 percent have cars at home but choose to ride the Trolley because it competes well in providing transportation to many destinations.

San Diego's ridership reflects a healthy balance of commuters, tourists and recreational users. For example, 18 percent of all Trolley trips are for recreational purposes and approximately 30,000 passengers (twice more than expected) took the Trolley to the 1998 Super Bowl game. Since the rail system was extended to Qualcomm Stadium, approximately 20 percent of all stadium trips are made aboard the Trolley. Cost recovery for the San Diego Trolley has been especially encouraging with figures approaching a 95 percent cost recovery from fares.

Ridership on the St. Louis Metrolink, now more than 44,000 per day, has exceeded initial projections of only 17,000. About 73 percent of Metrolink's passengers own cars yet choose to take the train. The fare-box recovery rate is 41.8 percent, which far exceeds the area's bus system. Light rail has also proven to be a part of a downtown revival.

While we may not have any one dominant central business district today, Orange County is "growing up" and we must have a vision of how we want to shape our community into the future. Public transit can offer a valuable transportation choice to serve such growth if it is implemented correctly. OCTA must still answer a significant number of important questions and address many issues as part of the environmental and engineering process and I will hold them accountable to do so.

As a conservative, I'm willing to keep an open mind and see if the studies show that the system can provide a safe, convenient and cost-effective travel choice at a fair price. If OCTA earns the public's support, the agency will very likely succeed in building an infrastructure investment for future generations. If OCTA does not provide an open and honest analysis, then the public is likely to pull the emergency chord and thereby bring light rail planning to a screeching halt.