

COMMENTARY / ANALYSIS / TIMES INTERVIEW

OPINION

THE STATE

Los Angeles Times

The Future of L.A. Transit Just Might Be Via the Bus

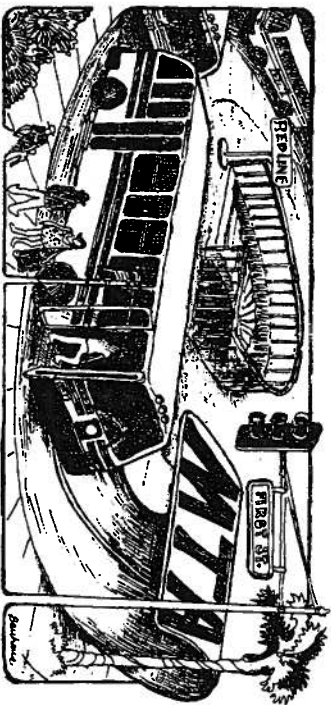
By James E. Moore II
and Robert W. Poole

Recent news accounts concerning the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's debt have focused on how the shortfall will affect the agency's future. Whether or not its San Fernando Valley operations are spun off to a separate or quasi-separate agency, the MTA will face an enormous debt burden for decades. The debt can probably be managed, but only if major changes are made in the MTA's objectives and operations.

The single most important decision is to make permanent the MTA board's current moratorium on adding rail lines. It is rail that has created the mountain of debt. Rail is far too costly for the limited number of riders it can handle. The same public subsidy that supports 100 bus trips will support only 40 heavy-rail trips, 10 light-rail trips or six commuter-rail trips, according to the MTA's own figures. This is not a good deal for L.A.'s transit-dependent or its taxpayers.

Ending all rail projects once the subway to North Hollywood is done means no subway extensions to the Eastside or Westside and no Blue Line to Pasadena. The latter project, championed in a new bill by state Sen. Adam Schiff (D-Burbank), would shift the project to a new Pasadena rail authority. But changing agencies will do nothing to trim the project's cost—which is at least \$700

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GERRY BAUHAUS WILLIAMS / for the Times

million more than has already been spent. There is no way the modest ridership justifies that kind of money.

If rail lines are not cost-effective, what alternative do we have to give transit users fast, reliable transportation? Research suggests that busways can deliver far more service for the dollars spent. For example, a simple count of the buses using the El Monte Busway on the San Bernardino Freeway reveals that this guideway provides more than three times the passenger miles per hour as the Long Beach-Los Angeles Blue Line at more than twice the Blue Line's average speed (52 mph versus 21 mph). Adding the carpools using the busway brings its total carrying capacity to the equivalent of 5.7 freeway lanes, compared with just 0.6 lane-equivalents for the Blue Line. The El Monte Busway costs less than one-

tenth as much as the Blue Line. Where should such busways be added? The MTA and the California Department of Transportation are already adding

them in the form of carpool lanes. But the MTA is not using, or planning to use, them exclusively for the kind of express-bus service provided by Foothill Transit on the El Monte. Yet there's far more potential for such service, linked with improved local bus service, if only the MTA would back off rail.

Rail rights of way provide another possible setting for busways. The MTA has bought up several such corridors (including Burbank-Chandler in the Valley). Though they are intended for rail, they should be examined for use as busways. Even existing rail corridors should be studied for possible conversion to busways. This includes the Green Line on the Century Freeway, originally designed as a busway, and possibly the Metrolink corridors.

Cost-effectiveness and the federal consent decree obligating the MTA to relieve overcrowding are two compelling reasons to expand bus service in Los Angeles. One way to make bus-transit dollars go far-

ther is to buy bus service competitively. In the San Gabriel Valley, the all-contract service of Foothill Transit has led to more bus service at lower fares. Similar success stories can be found in Denver, Indianapolis, Las Vegas, San Diego and other cities. Proposals for a valley transit zone, able to provide more transit for fewer dollars, are predicated on the use of competitive contracting to reduce costs.

To be sure, there are potential obstacles. All the cities using contract service have had to cope with federal labor-protection provisions that accompany federal transit aid. The provisions require up to six years of severance pay for any transit employee laid off as a result of contracting. While this provision can reduce the rate of change and the amount of early savings, it has not proved to be a fatal obstacle. Potentially more serious are the MTA's contracts with its unions, which provide that any entity taking over service from the agency assume all existing MTA labor contracts, with no loss of worker rights or benefits. Foothill got around this by a fluke, which is unlikely to happen again. It will require great legal skill to come up with a way of providing new bus-service arrangements not encumbered by such provisions.

The federal consent decree may work in favor of such arrangements. If bus advocates can rethink their traditional solidarity with the transit unions, they will learn that the same number of transit dollars can increase bus service by 20% to 50% under competitive contracting. In the Foothill zone, savings have been great enough to allow fares lower than those charged by the MTA. The power of these numbers may prove more persua-

sive to bus-rider advocates than calls to class interests—especially if the transit unions can be persuaded to support reasonable compromises that will give them an admittedly smaller piece, but of an expanding pie.

Another way to provide more usable transit is to legalize and encourage small-scale transportation, which can be more economical and user-friendly than large buses where ridership is low. The MTA is experimenting with shuttle-van services that it can contract from private-sector operators. There may also be a market for door-to-door shuttles (like airport shuttles) to ferry commuters to such large employment centers as Warner Center or Century City. If employers in these locations offered monthly commuting allowances instead of providing free parking, commuters might use the money either for parking or for shuttle (or other transit) service. Many commuters who will not ride buses might find door-to-door shuttles more attractive.

Finally, the MTA could relieve some of its overcrowded buses by encouraging private entrepreneurs to operate jitneys along such routes. Hundreds of such vans in Miami, and thousands in Brooklyn, the Bronx and Queens, offer transportation as good as, or better than, city buses—at the same fare. But these jitneys are entirely self-supported by the passengers. The only modest government expenditure is the cost of a licensing program.

There is no shortage of good ideas for providing more and better transit with less money. The only question is whether the MTA board will have the courage to implement such measures. □

LETTERS TO THE TIMES

Busways Instead
of Rail Lines

■ It dumbfounds me that James Moore and Robert Poole are so steeped in their anti-rail bias that they actually promote studying the conversion of the Green Line and MetroLink corridors to being busways ("The Future of L.A. Transit Just Might Be Via the Bus," Opinion, Aug. 30). Amazing!

While busways are less costly than a rail system, to be productive they must be grade-separated with costly improvements (bridges or undercrossings). Otherwise the buses are slowed by cross-traffic. And a busway can be the object of Not in My Back Yard resistance as much as a rail line. It is virtually certain any proposal to convert the Burbank-Chandler right of way that Moore and Poole mention to being a busway would be met with NIMBYism from the adjacent neighborhoods.

DANA GABBARD
President, Southern California
Transit Advocates, Los Angeles

■ Jitneys may help solve transportation problems in the Los Angeles area, but their effectiveness will be limited to the local neighborhood level. Due to the immense sprawl of the Los Angeles region, the major bus routes with full-size buses will have to remain the foundation of the mass transit system if the bus, instead of rail or subway, is to be the transportation mode of the future.

Most people must eventually travel outside their neighborhood across town, and the jitney is not suitable for these cross-town jaunts. The difficulty with a bus-based transit system will be the need to create bus-only lanes on surface streets. To do this may mean eliminating lanes currently used by cars. A difficult proposition in this car-based city.

Otherwise, the time of bus trips on surface streets will increase with the overall increase of city traffic, and buses may not prove an attractive alternative to car travel. I currently see an increase in my travel time as my bus sits in traffic in my commute through West Los Angeles.

MATTHEW HETZ
Los Angeles

■ The column epitomizes the "silly season" depths to which the debate over public transportation has descended. Rip up the Green Line, pave over MetroLink? Entice commuters off the freeways with an armada of sooty, lumbering motor coaches?

Buses of course are vital to any overall network. But the region has had one of the nation's largest bus fleets for decades. Does anyone really consider that problematic achievement a substitute for a working rapid transit system?

Los Angeles has already blundered once with the wholesale abandonment of 1,100 miles of Red Car routes. How many more mistakes will Southern California be allowed to make?

DONALD A. STANWOOD
Costa Mesa

Los Angeles Times

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Published by The Times Mirror Company
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