

THE STATE

The MTA Makes a Right Turn: Will It Stay on Course?

**By James E. Moore II,
Harry W. Richardson
and Peter Gordon**

MTA interim director Julian Burke's call for an immediate halt to most of the agency's planned rail projects is the right decision at the right time for the right reasons.

Los Angeles faces no more compelling question than the moral and fiscal merits of defrauding county taxpayers out of \$750 million a year in sales taxes in an attempt to decongest freeways by relying on trains, while destroying a bus system that serves as the carrier of last resort by providing 350 million trips annually for low income passengers. Since Proposition A funds began to be diverted from buses and fares were raised to fatten the capital account for construction of the Blue Line, the drop in total bus boardings equals 40% of current transit ridership.

The "achievements" of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority are well-documented: Implausible projections of costs and overestimations of the popularity of rail transit; decimation of bus ridership; escalating construction costs; excessive political interference in choosing contractors and in prioritizing rail

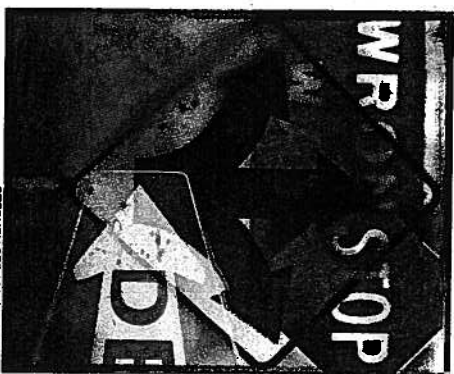
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lines; financial mismanagement; lobbying and contributions scandals; construction mishaps, from sinkholes to a less than meritorious accident record, and, above all, the paradox of "more spending, fewer transit riders."

Consequently, the MTA board should take Burke's cue and steer the agency toward change. But some board members are resisting. Former MTA Board Chairman Larry Zarian has said that "We shouldn't have started it [the rail system], but we are there. We've got to finish what we started." No, we don't. Taking Zarian's advice would only compound the enormous losses already incurred.

Zarian's most recent stance is quite different from the fiercely pro-rail view he espoused when the NAACP and the Bus Riders Union sued the MTA to end bus-service cutbacks and stop raising fares, but not different enough. Thanks to Burke, Los Angeles may yet dodge Zarian's bullet. Expanding the rail system to a puny fraction of its planned size might make L.A. rail proponents look a little less foolish, but the devastating impact on the city's transportation services is not worth the political protection it would afford.

In any case, the rail option is irrelevant because we already have a good idea of what Los Angeles of 2017 will look like and, accordingly, fewer than 50 miles of rail lines are not going to make the difference rail advocates claim. Most of the economic forces shaping the city are apparent. New technology makes urban production and consumption possible over



STEPHENSEDMAN / L.A. Times

ever larger areas. This, combined with growth in incomes, reduces sensitivity to transportation costs and the incentive to centralize activities. Companies and households will decentralize because it permits them to escape congestion and social ills.

The Los Angeles metropolitan area of the future will become even larger and, on average, less dense than it is now. Employment will be more dispersed. Fewer areas will qualify as employment centers, and job densities in those that do will diminish. Downtown will become even less relevant to the region's lifestyle

and economy, though the ideal of a quaint, walkable 24-hour downtown experience will doubtless remain the eternal pipe dream of downtown boosters. Also, we will stop thinking of travel and telecommunications as substitutes: They are complements. More telecommunications means more commerce, and more travel. Travel will become more frequent, but a smaller proportion of trips will be related to work.

Rail advocates counter these assertions with promises of transit-oriented development. They contend that land uses can be reconfigured by making appropriate (rail) transit investments. But these effects are thin, and powerful forces will continue to move urban form in the opposite direction.

Experience shows that trains cannot decongest highways, but that the dispersion of population and employment has been doing so for years. The primary national data source for travel behavior recently revealed that trip speeds increased between 1990 and 1995, just as they did between 1983 and 1990. These changes in settlement and employment patterns deflate the projections of "impending gridlock" that continue to be used to justify costly rail projects.

Current MTA Board Chairman Richard Riordan seems to recognize that the agency must change directions, yet he faces difficult constraints of his own. The mayor has made rail promises to the San Fernando Valley that he knows neither he nor Los Angeles can keep. His careful,

orchestrated shift toward busways, which might include the conversion of already constructed rail lines, suggests a promising strategy. Burke is feeding him the ammunition he needs.

Busways worked for Houston Mayor Robert Lanier. Lanier terminated construction of the Houston rail system, promoted busways, saved money and greatly improved both the quality and quantity of transit service. Another Republican mayor, New York's Rudolph W. Giuliani, is fighting his own transit unions and the taxi lobby to legalize privately owned van services that, others have noted, both put and take people to work. These vans' clandestine existence demonstrates that even New York's vast rail-transit system is inadequate. Black-market transit provides opportunities to immigrant and/or minority entrepreneurs. Giuliani's call for the vans' legalization is an example of economic policy and transportation planning working together.

If Riordan puts Giuliani's vans on Lanier's busways in Los Angeles, the mayor would succeed in doing much more than merely honoring his obligations to the Valley. He would expand transit service and ridership for all Los Angeles at a small fraction of the cost of the MTA's programs, programs that serve fewer transit riders every year. This would cost the MTA its exclusive franchise on transit in Los Angeles, but this is inevitable. In its current form, the MTA serves only itself, and fails the people of this city. □

LETTERS TO THE TIMES

MTA and the Direction for Public Transit

■ I cannot help but be dismayed by the views concerning public transit in Los Angeles as expressed by James E. Moore II, Harry W. Richardson and Peter Gordon in "MTA Makes a Right Turn" (Opinion, Dec. 28). Apparently, auto-driven suburban sprawl will continue to lead us into the best of all possible worlds, since it "permits companies and households to escape social ills."

In this scenario, downtown L.A. can also be written off as a no-man's land, with the very idea of a city center being halfway hospitable after dark being dismissed as "an eternal pipe dream." Impending gridlock on the freeways? Not to worry: "... trip speeds have continued to increase since 1980."

Men and women of goodwill can honestly disagree on solutions to Southern California's transportation problems. But to get beyond the current zero-sum bus versus rail debate, much less bring a sense of long-term direction to the MTA, surely limited credence needs to be given to "experts" such as these who persist in burying their heads in the sand.

DONALD A. STANWOOD
Costa Mesa

■ There is much justification for criticism of the performance of the MTA. However, the value of the ultimate goal of providing a truly alternate means of transportation

cannot be denied. Despite the authors' consistent and continuous advocacy of more buses, they do not constitute a true alternative. For the most part they are vying for the same precious resource as the private automobile, which is obviously the reason for traffic congestion. Busways don't help either because they are also open to car-poolers and have to merge with the other traffic somewhere.

They offer the idea that there isn't proper population distribution to make a rail system work in this region. Clearly this is due to the availability of the freeways and the options provided for the automobile. It took many years and billions of dollars to put the freeway system into place. It will take many years and billions of dollars to build a rail system that would be a true alternative. Rail systems also can easily adjust their capacities to meet peak demands and have the potential to become driverless devices.

All predictions show a tremen-

dous influx of people into this area. If the choice exists, many of them will opt to use the alternate system and change the demographics the article cites.

HUGH A. BARNWELL
Hawthorne

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