

Commentary

PERSPECTIVE ON THE MTA

Admit Rail Plan Is Dead and Move On



Don't bankrupt the agency when there is so much that we can and should do to improve transportation in L.A.

By **JAMES E. MOORE II**
and **THOMAS A. RUBIN**

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority is at a crossroads. Congress has essentially repudiated the federal government's full funding grant agreement with the MTA. The agency's congressional appropriation also has been cut in half. The General Accounting Office has reported that the MTA does not have the fiscal resources to pursue its rail plan. U.S. District Judge Terry J. Hatter Jr. has issued a consent decree favoring the Bus Riders Union in its lawsuit against the agency. Chief Executive Officer Joseph Drew has resigned under withering criticism. And Transportation Secretary Federico Peña has stated his intention to withhold an additional \$31 million in funds.

These developments are important because the rail plan is the holy grail of public policy in Los Angeles. No other project places such an enormous call on public resources. The rail system is our longest-range plan, executed at our grandest scale. It will, we are told, decongest our roads, clean our air, reconfigure our city and revitalize our economy.

Constructing the system has been an act of nearly blind faith. Despite the demise of the aerospace industry, the collapse of the housing market, the riot, the fires, the Northridge earthquake and steady decline in bus service, Los Angeles has kept its civic eye on the rail prize.

We have agreed to tax ourselves evermore intensively. We have closed trauma centers and scaled back other public health resources. We have tolerated busy signals when we dial 911. We have squeezed into the most crowded buses in the United States, all because we knew what had to be done: Complete the rail system.

But recent events have brought the MTA to a point at which it can no longer pursue business as usual. There is an awful truth waiting for us, a truth the MTA board already knows but has not yet decided how to explain. The board recently acknowledged that the subway component of the rail plan may have to be brought above ground to reduce costs. The truth is much harsher. The truth is that the rail plan is dead. The system is a stillborn failure.

While the MTA board debates where to bury the body, consider the autopsy results. Every MTA rail project has had significant cost overruns, with some final costs running as high as four to six times original planning estimates. Cost overruns on Segment 1 of the Red Line totaled nearly \$168 million. None of the overrun was covered by the federal or state governments; all must be absorbed by MTA and the city.

As costs have soared, revenues have dwindled. Congress appears to favor total elimination of federal assistance within a few years. With the exception of local sales taxes, the agency has greatly overestimated all of its major revenue sources, including fare income and federal, state and local capital and operating funds, and fare income. The MTA's 20-year plan projects 50% federal funding for the San Fernando Valley, Eastside and Westside Red Line extensions, amounting to a total federal commitment of more than \$2.9 billion. One of Oregon Sen. Bob Packwood's last major acts was to shift a large share of new rail funds to Portland's Westside light rail project. As a result, the Senate allocated \$60 million to Portland and only \$45 million to the MTA for 1996. The Congressional Budget Conference Committee eventually increased the Red Line allocation to \$85 million, but all future federal funding is now in question.

The MTA knows this and has worked overtime to conceal the inevitable funding shortfall. The agency now finds itself

committed to construction of rail lines it cannot afford to build or operate, while simultaneously under court mandate to lower bus fares and improve bus service.

Probably no other transportation agency in the United States has more funds available to it than MTA. But even these resources are not adequate for the agency to complete both the current Red Line extension to the east San Fernando Valley and the Blue Line extension to Pasadena. The agency might finish one project or the other, but it can't finish both, much less the other eight rail lines it identifies as priorities.

The time has come to accept rail's failure and start over while the MTA, the city and the state still have an opportunity to rebuild their credibility in this arena with one another and with Congress. Attempts to reanimate rail's corpse can only lead to the continued destruction of public transit in Los Angeles and the eventual bankruptcy of the MTA.

Facing the truth about rail places a host of new transportation options within reach. We don't have to ask the federal government for rail funds. We can ask instead for bus capital and operating funds. We don't have to build exclusive rights of way for trains. We can build busways instead, facilities with greater flexibility, lower costs and higher capacities than rail lines. We can give buses priority access to city streets, allow entrepreneurs to enter the transit market and compete with the MTA, construct more high occupancy vehicle and toll lanes, better manage traffic flow and respond more quickly to accidents.

We do not have to do any of these things, but they become viable options once we take the first crucial step back from rail's fiscal abyss. The promise of rail is empty, but there remains much we can and should do to improve public and private transportation in Los Angeles. We should begin by burying the rail plan. We should hurry. Already, there is an odor.

James E. Moore II is an associate professor of urban planning at USC. Thomas A. Rubin is a former controller-treasurer of MTA's predecessor, the SCRFD. They are coauthors of a series of Reason Foundation policy studies on the MTA.

LETTERS TO THE TIMES

Mass Transit Decisions for L.A.'s Future

■ "Admit Rail Plan Is Dead and Move On" (Commentary, Dec. 13) merges two separate issues, damaging our ability to improve Los Angeles transit. The two questions are: Is the MTA an efficient, effective organization? Does Los Angeles need rail transit?

The answers are, respectively, no and yes. Too many commentators suggest that since the MTA is inefficient and ridden with excessive politics, we should stop building a rail transit system. They are right that the MTA is a poorly structured organization, beginning with the board, but wrong to assume that we don't need a modern mass transit system.

Can't we rebuild MTA into a positive, less political organization that puts maximum energy into building transit?

EDWIN G. STAUSS
Woodland Hills

■ The column on the MTA's continued fixation with an untenable rail-oriented plan was right on the money. The failure of the entire MTA and the much needed improvements in the L.A. area transportation system can be laid squarely at the doorstep of the politicians of all stripes who "run" L.A. County, the city of L.A., the MTA board and MTA management. Egoism and ineptitude reign supreme!

WALT KILMANAS
Redondo Beach

■ As an environmental consultant, I found the recommendations of James E. Moore II and Thomas A. Rubin absolutely hilarious. They claim the answer to transportation problems in the L.A. Basin is abandoning all proposed rail lines (not just subways) and improving bus transportation.

Surveys show that all our existing subways and aboveground commuter rail lines provide "hassle-free" transportation to multitudes of commuters each day. I ride the Blue Line from Long Beach to L.A. for downtown meetings, and my commute time is never more than 45 minutes, while taking a bus (actually, several buses with transfers) would require two hours or more. Even giving buses "priority access to city streets," as they suggest, will not encourage the majority of commuters to ride buses, as buses will still be compelled to stop at traffic signals and deal with gridlock.

Second, Rubin and Moore's idea would contribute additional vehicles to our already crowded streets and freeways and add to deg-

radation of air quality, while rail transportation reduces traffic and air pollution.

Yes, Metro Rail construction has been plagued with inconceivable cost overruns and disasters, but denying residents access to "hassle-free" commuting is not the answer. We must instead find a far more responsible method of managing the allocated funds. Perhaps penalizing, rather than rewarding, wayward contractors would be a start.

KATHY KEANE
Long Beach

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Investments

■ A society that invests capital in an overvalued stock market is likely to be a society that undervalues its human capital.

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