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OP-ED

## Metro: Make riders, not rail, the priority

By James E. Moore II  
and Thomas A. Rubin

**T**HE Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority's ridership has been falling steadily since 2014, losing on average 69,000 daily riders each month. The most recent 12 months of data show a decrease of more than 10% compared with the same period three years ago, and Metro's current "annual boardings" — just under 400 million — represent a drop of almost 20% from the system's 1985 peak, even though the county's population has increased by nearly a fifth since then.

It wouldn't be difficult to turn these figures around, as Metro's history shows: The transportation authority should stop focusing primarily on building new rail and use a fair share of its voter-supplied wealth to lower fares and improve the bus system.

The agency's own data make both the problem and the solution clear.

Between 1982 and 1985, Metro ridership in L.A. exploded by 40%, jumping from 354.1 million to 497.2 million annual boardings. The reason was simple: The increase followed bus fare reductions, from 85 cents a ride to 50 cents. A minor share (20%) of funds generated by Proposition A in 1980 (the first of



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**TO STOP** the steep decline in ridership, Metro should spend a fair share of its ballot-measure money on better bus service.

four ballot measures increasing sales taxes to support transportation) was used to subsidize the cost. Then as now, Metro riders tended to be low-income, some very low-income. Reducing their travel costs allowed them to travel more.

But in 1986, Metro ended the fare subsidy and shifted the funds to building rail lines, beginning with the Long Beach Blue Line, which opened in 1990. Total transit ridership proceeded to fall until the NAACP, the Bus Riders' Union and others took Metro to federal court

to protect bus service in 1994. Their argument was that the expansion of rail was coming at the expense of bus routes, bus frequency and bus riders, and it was disproportionately harming minorities, the elderly and the young. Metro settled, and the deal was enshrined in a 10-year consent decree starting in 1996.

The settlement allowed Metro to build all the rail it could afford, so long as specific bus service improvements were made too. Those improvements included reducing

fares, increasing service on existing lines, establishing new lines, replacing old buses and keeping the fleet clean. Lo and behold, while the decree was in force L.A.'s transit ridership rose by 36%. When Metro was no longer bound by the settlement, it refocused its efforts almost exclusively on new rail projects. The quality of bus service began declining in almost every way measurable, and overall ridership again fell.

With the funds generated by the Measure R sales tax increases, voted on in 2008, and last year's Measure M increases — which will provide \$121 billion over the next 40 years — Metro has more than enough money to reinvigorate bus service. At a minimum, it should return to the program under the consent decree: building all the new rail it wants, as long as bus service is improved as well.

Our detailed analysis of Metro's 2015 budget identified \$573 million available for bus operations and improvements that was spent instead entirely on rail construction and debt service on funds borrowed to accelerate that construction. If just half of this \$573 million from Metro's much larger total budget was redirected to improve the bus system, rail construction would slow but Metro would likely see growth in total ridership. (It is impossible to do the same analysis on Metro's 2016 budget: Its documentation has be-

come less transparent.)

Metro's rail-centric approach to transit persists, it appears, primarily because of the makeup of its board of directors. Appointed by the mayor, the board members are mostly elected officials. No board member specifically represents transit riders. It's not surprising then that the board's concerns seem to be less about the welfare of most Metro users and more about funding capital-intensive rail projects that serve particular constituents.

The Metro system now has 93 rail stops, with 18 under construction. It has 18,500 bus stops. Bus service will always predominate in L.A. If we expand and improve it, and reduce fares, transit ridership will increase again, quickly, better serving the low-income riders Metro has been mostly ignoring. Los Angeles needs a transit system that focuses on proven strategies that work not just for a few Angelenos, but for all of us.

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# OPINION

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Rail is the only sane answer for the long commutes typical in Los Angeles. See all those buses on the freeway towing five or six buses behind? Oh, wait, physics prevents that.

During the morning rush hour, the Red Line subway is packed. It should go deeper into the San Fernando Valley than North Hollywood.

There will always be a place for buses, but not for long-distance trips. Ask someone who's spent three hours to go 15 miles.

MICHAEL BARRETT JR.  
Burbank

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THOMAS FUCHS  
West Hollywood

If Metro really wants to reverse declining bus ridership, its officials should use the system. They'll find what they need to fix.

Then there's the "bus to nowhere" problem. Line 780, for example, terminates near the Expo Line rail station on La Cienega and Jefferson — not at it, only near it. The bus stops about half a mile short at a Metro facility, forcing passengers to get off and wait for another bus to the Expo Line. This decision may serve the system well, but it is grossly inconvenient for riders.

Why? Because it is running ahead of schedule, and drivers cannot leave a bus stop too early. But what's so bad about an early arrival?

Imagine it's hot and you're waiting at the bus stop, but all will be right soon because the bus is just a few blocks away. But suddenly, just short of your stop, the bus pulls over and waits. And waits.

As a daily user of the Los Angeles County Metro bus system, I can suggest a number of changes that might help reverse the decline in ridership.

Re "Metro: Make riders, not rail, the priority," Opinion, Nov. 10

## TO FIX THE BUS, ride the bus

## LETTERS