

Sunday columns

Royko: Donald, Marla needed
Quindlen: No room at the inn
Rooney: Mingling with stars

PAGE 5

VIEWPOINT

■ Editorials	2
■ Public Forum	2
■ Peter Schrag	3
■ Guest column	4
■ Mary McGrory	3

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Cliches can't make light rail transit succeed

By James E. Moore II

Americans have accepted the idea that providing transportation services almost always requires substantial government support. The standard rationalization for subsidies is ensuring equitable levels of service for communities that would not otherwise receive it. However, once an enterprise is removed from the discipline of the marketplace, it is deprived of the information it needs to best manage its own resources. Transit is no exception.

Planners and legislators have compounded the problem by coupling the equity objective with a series of transportation cliches, namely: transit is little used because it is underfunded, more transit investments relieve traffic problems, higher urban densities are efficient, widening crowded roads solves congestion problems, etc. The most entrenched and expensive of the cliches is that light rail systems will attract commuters in sufficient numbers to decongest roads.

American cities have been decentralized for more than 100 years. As a result, most of us do not live or work near existing or proposed rail transit stations. This makes using rail an unattractive and expensive option. And it is no surprise that recently installed rail systems are failing to

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attract riders.

Nevertheless, the standard cliches persist in the competing versions of the 1991 Surface Transportation Reauthorization Act (STRA) put forth by Congress and the administration. These candidate replacements for the 1987 Surface Transportation and Urban Relocation Assistance Act promise to expend many billions of dollars over the next six years in ways that are not cost-effective. In particular, much of this money is directed to rail projects.

The administration, Senate and House versions of the STRA are five-year proposals that weigh in at \$105 billion, \$123 billion and \$151 billion, respectively. The administration's program is distinguished by substantial requirements for state and local cost-sharing. The most important aspect of Senate bill S 1204, the Surface Transportation Efficiency Act, is the new degree of flexibility it grants states in spending federal transportation funds. House bill HR 3566, the Intermodal Surface Transportation and Infrastructure Act, extends until 1999 2.5 cents of the 5 cent per gallon federal gasoline tax imposed in September 1990. The House bill proposes disposing of \$5.2 billion in extended gas tax revenues by undertaking more than 470 special transportation projects of "national significance."

Negotiating compromise legislation has proved difficult. A fragile Thanksgiving agreement between the House and Senate calls for spending \$151 billion over six

years, with increased spending flexibility for the states. The administration would probably accept such a compromise.

All three candidate versions of the 1991 Transportation Reauthorization Act place too much emphasis on new capital projects and operating subsidies. But this shared foolishness aside, the Senate bill is probably the best deal for California. At best, the Senate's legislation might provide the state an additional \$17.8 billion in transportation funds, while simultaneously cutting a record number of spending strings. Any new federal transportation funds California might receive would best be spent in two broad categories: (1) improved infrastructure maintenance, including seismic retrofitting, and (2) improved network coordination and control.

It is always tempting to underfund maintenance activities. Successful maintenance policies are an invisible victory. New facilities are much more viable, and thus easier to justify to the public. However, California's transportation facilities are capital-intensive inventories with large carrying costs.

Ignoring these costs is leading to closed bridges and viaducts, suppressed speed limits, and occasional catastrophes like the collapse of Oakland's Nimitz Freeway during the Loma Prieta earthquake of 1989. No version of the 1991 Transportation Act allocates funds sufficient to allow California to recover from the state's self-

imposed infrastructure maintenance deficit, but the benefits of any additional maintenance are large in terms of lives and income.

Managing a large urban traffic network is a difficult task. Fortunately, the objectives are reasonably well-defined, and the available technology is well-understood. The benefits available from improved traffic control measures are also likely to be substantial, particularly benefits from measures related to facility pricing. Taken together, improved infrastructures maintenance and network control constitute a much more efficient level of transportation inventory management than is currently the case.

State and local transportation agencies tend to favor the Senate bill, but for the wrong reasons. For example, the Los Angeles County Transportation Commission (LACTC) is particularly enthusiastic about the prospect of shifting federal transportation funds from highways to rail transport. The commission is determined to build a 300-mile, \$45.9 billion rail transit system for the residents of Los Angeles.

The commission is pressing its rail initiative despite the fact that conventional transit in the United States has been a declining industry for 70 years. Huge and growing subsidies have done no more than maintain local transit at a ridership pla-

See RAIL / Pg. 3

Urban decentralization makes light rail transit unfeasible

RAIL / From Page 1

leau. Between 1978 and 1988 transit use grew by only 1.1 percent per year nationally, while the transit operating assistance increased by 9.3 and 15 percent per annum, respectively. During the same period, federal assistance grew by 3.3 percent per year (three times the rate of ridership increase), while state and local subsidies soared at an average annual rate of 18.1 percent.

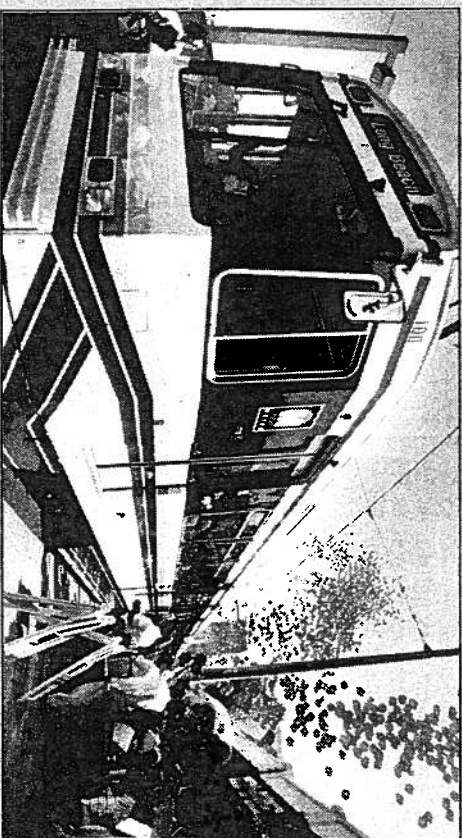
Rail is the worst part of the story. A 1989 U.S. Department of Transportation Urban Mass Transportation Administration (UMTA) report estimates that: (1) the recently installed heavy rail systems in Atlanta, Baltimore, Miami and Washington have ridership shortfalls averaging 35 percent of their respective forecasts; (2) the new light rail facilities in Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Portland and Sacramento show average ridership shortfalls of 65 percent; and (3) three of these eight transit districts lost net system patronage after rail facilities were added. Patronage losses resulted from higher bus fares and reductions in bus service instituted because of deficits and cost overruns, and bus route realignments intended to increase ridership on the new rail system.

The Long Beach-Los Angeles Blue Line train began service on July 5, 1990. The LACTC's official Blue Line ridership forecast is 35,000 boardings per weekday in 1991, and 54,500 boardings in the year 2000. In 1988, Harvard economist John Kain used a mathematical model published by the University of Southern California's Planning Institute to calculate a Blue Line Ridership forecast of 20,380 to 29,974 weekday boardings in 1991.

On June 3, 1991, researchers from USC enumerated riders on 40 percent of the Blue Line trains, estimating ridership at about 24,100 boardings. Assuming weekend boardings occur at the weekday rate, accounting for capital cost of \$877 million and 1991 operating cost of \$38.6 million, and conforming to the technical assumptions in UMTA's report, this implies a public cost of \$29.16 per passenger round trip on the Blue Line. This is about twice the average cost for any of the comparable systems UMTA evaluated.

The Blue Line subsidy will not be reduced to the dismal average of other tran-

BLUE LINE RIDERSHIP AND ITS COSTS



Current ridership on the Long Beach-Los Angeles Blue Line puts the average cost of each round trip per passenger at \$29.16. This is almost twice the average cost for similar systems in other cities as determined by the U.S. Department of Transportation's Urban Mass Transportation Administration.

Rail system	Weekly boardings (thousands)	Annualized total cost (millions)	Cost per passenger round trip
Long Beach - Los Angeles Blue Line	24.1	\$128.3	\$29.16
USC ridership count (June, 1991)	20.4 - 30.0	\$128.3	\$4.50 - 23.45
Harvard/USC 1991 ridership forecast	32.6	\$128.3	\$21.57
SCRITD ridership count (August, 1991)	35.0	\$128.3	\$20.08
LACTC 1991 ridership forecast	54.5	\$128.3	\$13.22
LACTC 2000 ridership forecast			
Heavy/Rail Systems (weighted average cost per passenger round trip)			\$17.32
Atlanta, Baltimore, Miami, and Washington			
Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Portland, and Sacramento			\$15.92
Light Rail Systems (weighted average cost per passenger round trip)			

Heavy rail systems have exclusive rights of way. Light rail systems may share the right of way with other vehicles. Weighted average cost per round trip based on actual ridership. The annualized capital cost for the Blue Line light rail system is based on capital investment of \$877 million, 10% discount rate, 40-year project lifetime, and 1991 operating cost of \$38.6 million. Blue line ridership counts by USC and the SCRITD are below the official forecast, but close to an unofficial forecast by Harvard researchers.

Daily News

sit systems unless the LACTC's pie-in-the-sky forecast of 54,500 weekday boardings is realized in full.

The LACTC's 1992 operating cost estimate for the Blue Line is \$44 million, which will boost the cost per passenger round trip to \$30.39 if ridership remains unchanged. The fare on the Blue Line recovers (at most) \$1.10 in revenues from each boarding.

It is a good bet that the benefits accruing to society do not merit a subsidy of

LACTC. There will be few economists of scale in the proposed rail network because different segments guideway and power technologies. Expanding the system can only compound the current deficit on a massive scale. Bus services are already being affected.

The Southern California Rapid Transit District (SCRITD) lost 96 million annual bus boardings (20 percent of total patronage) between 1985 and 1990. Ridership losses began the day the LACTC began banking district funds for future rail transit. In contrast, the Blue Line is attracting riders at a rate of only 8.8 million boardings per year. Ultimately, Los Angeles County taxpayers will have spent billions of dollars on transit, only to reduce transit use.

Complete the Los Angeles urban rail system with the Red Line, the Green Line, and the Orange Line; develop the old Southern Pacific Railroad rights-of-way in Los Angeles, San Bernardino and Riverside counties for commuter service; put a public policy gun to the head of Santa Fe Railroad and force it to sell its Orange County rights-of-way to the LACTC; and the resulting rail system still will be irrelevant to the 83 percent of Los Angeles County residents whose jobs are not located in areas of concentrated employment. Anyone will take transit that travels from their door directly to their destination, but few people are willing to take a bus, a train and a bus to complete a one-way trip from point A to point B. Even the poor, who are a lot like the rest of us, tend to prefer a bus-bus connection to the bus-train-bus combination.

No society has ever built its way out of congestion. Improved facilities only intensify demand for service. This does not mean there is no way out. Doomsday forecasts of 5 to 10 mile-per-hour freeway speeds are unsophisticated guesses.

The continuing decentralization of employment and residences in American cities, and in Los Angeles in particular, is an effective response to congestion costs. Such land market adjustments provide a powerful decongestant, but the potential for continued urban decentralization is principally a function of access to roads. The last place Californians should spend the next transportation dollar is on fixed rail transit.

\$28.19 per passenger round trip, especially since the great majority of the Blue Line's riders came from the bus system. Bus lines such as the 456, which ran parallel to the Blue Line, have been eliminated. The patrons on these bus lines were already doing their part to reduce congestion and improve air quality.

Worse, the Blue Line subsidy of \$28.19 per passenger round trip will probably increase if the rail system is built out to the \$49.5 billion level proposed by the

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EDITORIALS

PUBLIC FORUM

Rail transit has common sense on its side

The article by James E. Moore II, "Clutches can't make light rail succeed," in the Dec. 15 Daily News Viewpoint section, left me confused on a number of points. The article repeated the myths about rail transit in Southern California.

For Moore to say that "improved infrastructure, maintenance and network control" and "facility pricing" can manage a large urban traffic network is puzzling. What is "network control" and "facility pricing?" Are these references to toll roads? To make a statement that people will not commute using "a bus, train and a bus" is arrogance. People in cities all over the world commute that way every day. And to make the statement that "improved facilities only intensify demands for service" defies logic. Does Moore mean we should not improve or build freeways and everything will be fine?

To say that "continuing decentralization of employment and residences is an effective response to congestion costs" boggles the mind. Sprawl is good? Isn't it part of the problem?

Over the last decade, every urban county in Southern California except Ventura has had voter-approved sales tax increases specifically to fund transit projects. People vote to increase their taxes because they realize that something must be done about traffic congestion and they are willing to pay for it. Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside and Ventura counties have joined to form the Southern California Regional Rail Authority.

Beginning in October 1992, this commuter rail system, called Metrolink, will provide an alternative mode of transportation for workers in the San Fernando, Simi-Congo and Santa Clarita valleys via Burbank and Glendale to Union Station in downtown Los Angeles. The main goal is to get people and vehicles off the freeways and to provide a way to commute that is not as wasteful as driving alone in a car.

Instead of sitting in traffic staring at empty rail lines, we will have the option of riding in new double-deck commuter trains, able to relax, read or look at the traffic. Is this so terrible?

The process of building a regional transit system won't be easy or cheap. But people using their common sense know this process must continue.

— Robert D. Saunders
North Hollywood