

THE STATE

# The MTA's Love of Rail Must Yield to Reality of More Buses

By James E. Moore II and Thomas A. Rubin

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority faces growing criticism on an increasing number of fronts. In late October 1996, a federal judge ordered the agency to lighten the burden its rail plan has imposed on MTA bus service. Congress has reduced the MTA's requested rail appropriation by more than half, throwing into doubt the extent of future federal participation in the transit agency's rail program. Most recently, seven San Fernando Valley council members voted to freeze the city's \$200-million contribution to the MTA because the agency's "recovery plan" delays the start of construction on an east-west Valley rail line until at least 2007. And the Legislature's black caucus has warned that it will block a state loan for the L.A.-to-Pasadena line if the MTA does improve service in African American neighborhoods.

The crisis has produced fissures in the MTA board and a split between the board and the agency's senior staff. Board members are just now beginning to see through the MTA staff's fiscal smoke screen. They are learning the true trade-offs associated with rail construction and operation. This growing skepticism means the board can seriously consider the advantages of a number of transit options it has largely ignored in the past.

Los Angeles is perhaps the nation's

weakest candidate for a rail-transit system. In 1990, locations with greater than 12,500 jobs per square mile accounted for only 12% of the employment in Los Angeles, Riverside, Orange, Ventura and San Bernardino counties. These jobs were spread over 14 centers, including traditional downtown. The remaining 88% of jobs were dispersed throughout the five-county area.

The extraordinary transit capacity provided by exclusive lines is real, but rail has no monopoly on this advantage. Buses running on these lines do as well as trains in many respects, better in others. Busway capacities meet or exceed those of rail lines because busway speeds are higher and buses can be separated by seconds instead of minutes. In addition, buses offer the advantage of being able to leave the busway and operate on streets as collectors and distributors of riders.

The transit capacity delivered by the San Bernardino Freeway's El Monte busway swamps the service provided by the Blue Line train by a factor approaching five, but bus service accounts for only a small fraction of the passenger miles delivered by the El Monte. Most of the travel on this busway is by vehicles with two or more passengers.

The same is true of the Harbor Freeway Transitway. Caltrans built the elevated facility with the objective of providing bus and high-occupancy-vehicle service, but no new bus service has been added. The MTA has no buses to spare. The agency's capital is tied up in



MATTHEW STRAUSS / for The Times

rail facilities.

The most important reason for the paucity of buses on these facilities is the difficulty associated with entering the bus business. Competing with public transit is illegal. The benefits of busways could be greatly expanded if the buses were not strictly operated by a municipal monopoly. If public and private operators were allowed to compete on the same exclusive lines, ridership would greatly expand. New services would attract new riders. Premium services might even help some car addicts to kick their habits and use transit. Current transit users would benefit from efficiencies created by competition, including lower fares and increased quality and quantity of service.

The MTA's staff has rejected this option, contending that the agency must finish the rail system to avoid wasting the resources it has already committed to the project. This is good politics, but bad

economics. The MTA should spend its next dollar as wisely as possible, ignoring resources that cannot be recovered from past mistakes. The reward, so far, for investing in rail has been a steady erosion in bus service that squeezes the county's least-fortunate residents ever more tightly into the most crowded buses in the United States. Worse, MTA buses have lost 30% of 1985 ridership.

At first glance, the MTA's light- and heavy-rail lines appear to be irrecoverable costs as long as they remain obstructed by rail cars. But the capacity and range and level of services available from these facilities could be increased by banishing the trains and substituting buses. The above-ground lines can accommodate the existing bus fleet. The Red and Blue Line tunnels require a different strategy.

We don't have to guess. In 1990, Seattle Metro opened a bus tunnel running underneath its central business district. Delivered on time and only 10% over budget, the tunnel cuts bus-travel time through the downtown from 20 minutes to eight; the number of buses operating on surface streets have been reduced by 20%. About 25% of all downtown rush-hour bus trips occur in the tunnel. Authorities predict the number will be 40% by the year 2000.

As does Seattle Metro, the MTA would have to rely on dual-mode buses on underground lines. These vehicles can operate either from external electric power or as a standard diesel coach. This

allows bus-tunnel operations to be integrated with operations on other busways and streets.

The MTA should not restrict its attention to public transportation. However, there is much more it can do to control the indirect costs of automobile use. In L.A. County, Caltrans has scheduled construction of an extensive network of lanes for vehicles with two or more passengers. The "toll" for using these lanes is the inconvenience of forming a car pool. Once such a lane is in place, it becomes possible to consider additional pricing strategies.

One sensible use of toll revenues is the construction of new roads. Social priorities might dictate using the revenues for other purposes, such as reducing taxes, subsidizing the travel of low-income groups or improving and expanding public transportation.

The MTA board now has no choice but to seriously consider these and other alternatives to rail. It should live up to its court-approved agreement to improve its service in poorer neighborhoods by buying more buses. But rather than merely reacting, the agency should more vigorously fund construction of lanes for high-occupancy vehicles and invite greater competition into the market for transit services. The MTA should seriously study the engineering cost of converting rail lines to busways. Most important, it should stop burdening its funding requests with the "rail only" tag. The MTA doesn't have to ask local voters and the federal government for rail funds that benefit few at the expense of many. Rather, the transit agency can ask for bus and busway capital and operating funds that Los Angeles truly needs. □

James E. Moore II is associate professor of civil engineering and urban planning at USC. Thomas A. Rubin is a former controller-treasurer of the MTA's predecessor, the Southern California Rapid Transit District.

## LETTERS TO THE TIMES

## Rail vs. Buses for Southland Mass Transit

■ Once again anti-rail fanatics James E. Moore II and Thomas A. Rubin (Opinion, June 15) are given space to promote more freeway construction and those ugly, ludicrous multibillion-dollar elevated transitways which will be maxed out in 20 years and prove to be more problem than solution.

The excellent busway system of the Seattle Metro offers models for us to consider. However, if this were the final panacea they suggest, why is Seattle in the process of building a massive rapid-rail system?

ROGER CHRISTENSEN  
Sherman Oaks

■ The relevant question is car vs. transit, not rail vs. bus. The Los Angeles metropolitan area has a population of almost 15 million who must use 10 million cars and trucks to travel to work, schools, shopping and recreation. Thirty to 40 million trips are made each day, almost all by car. Only 2% to 4% of these trips are made by transit. Each trip made by car costs driver and community about \$7, a trip by bus \$2.80, and a trip by rail has a potential cost of about \$1.75.

Low-cost urban transportation depends on patronage. Rail transit benefits from economies of scale. The more passengers, the less real cost per trip. Buses presently have some economies of scale, but only because many now run mostly empty. Cars and freeways, on the other hand, have diseconomies of scale—the more cars, the greater the cost per trip.

## Adultery

■ Ugh! So now we have the politics of adultery.

LORON H. WASHBURN  
Redondo Beach

Buses and cars are both labor and space intensive. Eighty percent of bus cost is labor—salaries for drivers and mechanics. The principal charm of buses is that they are able to run on existing streets. Bus guideways are more costly than rail guideways. The Harbor Freeway high-occupancy vehicle lane and guideway construction cost is almost \$1 billion. It's one mile long.

These inefficiencies cost Angelenos tens of billions annually.

STANLEY HART, Chairman  
Transportation Committee  
Angeles Chapter, Sierra Club

■ My heart perked up June 14 at Hal Bernson's very practical push for a commuter train across the Valley using tracks that already exist. Of course, as is always the case when an idea seems to make sense, the bombardment was immediate. Is there any transportation system that won't cause one neighborhood or another some inconvenience? Metrolink suggested using lighter-weight trains. Maybe there is a combination of solutions to noise

and other problems. By the way, didn't freight trains once rumble down those tracks?

We must have some way to get people to work from the San Fernando Valley before 2011. That means working together, maybe even accepting some things we don't like, and being open to all ideas and options.

TOBI DRAGERT  
Tarzana

## HOW TO WRITE TO US

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