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OPINION

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## Weakest Metrolink

Commuter trains here have proved neither safe nor cost-effective.

By James E. Moore II

**T**HE HEAD-ON train crash Sept. 12 in Chatsworth has focused attention on how Metrolink operates its commuter trains and how the collision could have been avoided. The National Transportation Safety Board has called for installing automated positive train control systems, which override decisions made by train crews when necessary.

The question to ask, however, is not whether Metrolink needs positive train control but whether the region needs Metrolink.

Astonishingly, this question has never really been asked or answered. Metrolink was launched without any substantive evaluation of alternatives. It was established because the agencies involved had a unique fiscal and political window of opportunity in the 1990s, not because the service was ever determined to be a cost-effective use of transit dollars. Unfortunately, it is not. And the weak case for commuter rail in Los Angeles will erode further as the Southern California Regional Rail Authority, which operates Metrolink, and its member agencies incur new costs for needed safety improvements.

Don't mistake Metrolink's existence for strong evidence that we need it. The SCRRA was established in 1991 as a joint powers authority

funded by five local counties, led by the Los Angeles County Transportation Commission. Proposition C, a 1990 Los Angeles County half-cent sales tax for transportation, had recently passed, and the Blue Line light-rail train operating between Los Angeles and Long Beach had just begun service. In an environment of ready resources and rail enthusiasm, the commission (predecessor to the Metropolitan Transportation Authority) quickly proposed and mostly funded the new commuter rail system. Metrolink service began in 1992.

The new system was deployed almost overnight. The pace was fast, optimism was pervasive, and objective analysis was in short supply. The unfortunate result was a deadly mix: Metrolink passenger trains began op-

erating on a heavily used freight system, yet the need to stretch dollars to broaden service meant that the train-control technologies were kept to the minimum required by law.

Moving so quickly required some arm-twisting. The tracks the commission wanted to use were largely under the control of the Santa Fe, Southern Pacific and Union Pacific railroads. Some of the tracks saw little commercial use, but many sections were and remain critically important for transport of cargo to and from the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. News reports at the time said the commission resorted to threats of eminent domain, particularly against the economically vulnerable Santa Fe Railroad. In the end, the SCRRA acquired access to almost 500 miles of local track. Some was purchased outright, but much of it came in the form of easements on what are now Burlington Northern Santa Fe and Union Pacific lines.

This inter-jurisdictional tangle meant that deploying new safety technologies would involve coordination and cooperation among Metrolink, Burlington Northern and Union Pacific — guaranteeing that it never happened. So Metrolink trains were put into service using relatively low-tech train control, technology that became tragically ineffective Sept. 12.

SCRRA's low-tech approach is inappropriate for an agency that is pushing the envelope with respect to the number of passenger trains it imposes on freight rights of way. In Europe, freight and passenger train tracks are usually separate. In contrast, many U.S. systems mix passenger and freight trains on the same tracks, but nowhere is this practice as pervasive as in Southern California.

The benefits provided by Metrolink are not worth the risk. They are

not even worth Metrolink's costs. Data from the Federal Transit Administration show that Metrolink recovers about 45% of its annual operating and maintenance costs from fare revenues, but none of its capital costs. The balance of Metrolink's costs are covered by a stream of grants and subsidies in which local sales tax revenues are prominent.

Metrolink's benefits are for the most part felt only by the tax-subsidized commuters who ride the trains (and Metrolink employees). The system provides next to nothing in terms of freeway congestion relief. Even accounting for recent growth in ridership, data from the FTA and the Federal Highway Administration show that the system accommodates about 0.3% of total passenger miles traveled in the Los Angeles region. Metrolink reports that, on freeways that parallel Metrolink trains, the service diverts a little less than 3% of rush-hour travel volumes. If Metrolink service were discontinued tomorrow and all those passengers got back in their cars, there would be no perceptible change in freeway congestion or travel times.

Metrolink actually makes traffic conditions worse because it consumes resources that SCRRA's member agencies could dedicate to effective congestion relief measures, such as the creation of priced freeway lanes that can also operate as busways. Metrolink is an unsafe, economic sham, and it is time to pull the plug — if not for fiscal prudence then because we owe it to the injured and to the families of the dead.

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