COMMENTARY

Gold Line Is Just Glitter
By James E. Moore II

Civic-minded rail proponents hope that the new Metro Rail Gold Line will eventually help reconfigure Los Angeles into a network of accessible urban villages dominated by a teeming downtown. This is wishful thinking.

Thirty years of data reveals a boom in both nonwork travel and nontraditional commuting patterns. Employment in Los Angeles is dispersing, with local employment centers accounting for a dwindling share of jobs. Los Angeles' 60 miles of rail lines will not reverse the economic forces that drive these trends. In L.A., no rail system ever will.

Civic boosters can be forgiven their daydreams of a socially re-engineered Los Angeles, but the acts of salaried public officials cannot be so easily excused. For the Los Angeles County Transportation Commission and now the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the rail plan is a betrayal of their public trust.

Private firms grow by cutting costs and selling products and services that people want. In public agencies, cost-control leads to smaller budgets. Public agencies often grow by bankrupting themselves with overcommitments, ensuring a continuing need for tax dollars but placing an ever-increasing strain on public revenues.

The MTA's predecessor agency recognized that an expensive rail plan was a superb growth strategy, and it pressed the electorate to tax itself to build rail. Voters were told that a rail system would decongest roads, clean the air and change land uses to provide Los Angeles residents with a pedestrian-friendly lifestyle. These cynical misrepresentations have diverted attention from truly meaningful transit options.

The simple, unfortunate truth is that every mile of track we lay squanders resources that could otherwise produce more mobility for more people. For a fraction of the cost of the Los Angeles rail system, the region could have fielded a vastly better bus system carrying many more passengers.
Rail's perceived advantages result from separating transit vehicles from other traffic. This provides a higher level of service that makes transit a more attractive option for middle- and upper-income riders who have no intention of ever boarding an MTA bus. Unfortunately, most of this untapped transit market will never reside or work in the vicinity of a rail line.

If we are serious about providing transit options with a competitive level of service to everyone, then we will have to recognize that busways offer all of the advantages of rail lines plus lower construction, operating and maintenance costs; greater flexibility because buses can change their routes; and greater capacity than almost any rail line because bus arrivals and departures can be separated by seconds instead of minutes.

An effective bus strategy would require new levels of interagency cooperation, and this is possible. The MTA's Metro Rapid buses receive priority access to green lights at many of the Los Angeles Department of Transportation's traffic signals, and Caltrans continues to emphasize adding bus-width, high-occupancy-vehicle lanes — also known as carpool lanes — to freeways. We can go further, including the construction of direct carpool lane connections at freeway interchanges and dedicated, contraflow bus lanes on city streets that can be changed to coincide with rush hour.

We should also legalize private transit services. Private operators would produce new services attractive to all income groups and exert competitive pressure on the MTA. Placing a mix of private and public transit vehicles on a system of busway and high-occupancy-vehicle lanes would provide transportation options capable of competing with the private automobile.

Los Angeles deserves a high-quality transit system, and it is within our means to provide it. Fortunately, the price we must pay to proceed is relatively low. We have to be willing to learn from our mistakes, the Metro Rail Gold Line included.

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