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## **L.A. gets crash course in bus-lane decorum**

**By Michael Martinez**  
*Chicago Tribune*

LOS ANGELES — Pity Richard Jajja. He's a bus driver in a land where the car is king.

He is cruising on a new, sleek bus route — a \$350 million, landscaped two-lane road, off-limits to any vehicles except double-long buses such as his. But he says he is just a moving target for the worst of L.A.'s motorists.

"I'll tell you this: You could put soldiers with machine guns at the intersections, and they won't stop people" from crashing into the buses, said Jajja, 58.

L.A. drivers' bad reputation has gotten uglier since the 14-mile bus lanes opened in the San Fernando Valley in late October.

The launch was greeted with much local fanfare about how the bus service is a harbinger of the future and only the second of its kind in the country after a line in Miami, which also had collisions in its early days.

But at a rate of almost one a week, motorists have been slamming into the 60-foot Metro Liners whenever the buses leave their exclusive road to cross one of 36 intersections.

Since the trial runs began on the former railroad line early in the fall, there have been at least eight accidents resulting in dozens of injured bus passengers being taken to hospitals in neck braces.

The city already known for road rage, high-speed police chases and an aversion to public transportation is now home to motorists who — while yakking on their cellphones and running red lights — are crashing into buses described as the "most advanced transit vehicle in North America." At \$633,000 each, a Metro Liner costs almost twice the price of a regular bus.

"It's just that L.A. is such a car-oriented culture that running a red light is a fact of life around here," said Kymberleigh Richards, 49, of the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority, who was a passenger on Jajja's bus during a recent evening rush hour.

"Every single one of these accidents, it was the [car] driver running the red light, not the bus," Los Angeles County Sheriff's Lt. John Baylis said. Baylis added that at least four of the accidents involved motorists who were on their cellphones.

"L.A. drivers are stupid," said Larry Lewis, 23, a collections agent who was playing loud rap music as he prepared to drive through one intersection where two accidents have occurred. "They are blind. Half of them don't pay attention, bro'. Half of them probably don't have a license."

In their defense, motorists and their advocates say that the new bus route sometimes intersects with public streets at oblique angles or comes close to major intersections, creating confusion and difficult conditions for

turning.

Motorists have demanded more warning signs as far as a block or two away because many people aren't aware that an abandoned rail line is now an active road.

Transit officials have beefed up signs and signals and are considering more improvements.

But that hasn't stopped the jokes about one of Los Angeles' most emotional subjects: transportation. For example, take the name the Orange Line, which is drawn from the San Fernando Valley's agricultural past. Critics now lampoon it as the "Lemon Line" or, more injuriously, the "Black and Blue Line." A Los Angeles Times columnist suggested "Orange Crush."

At one point, a state senator called for the line to be closed until a safety study could be completed. He has since backed off and instead is seeking an analysis of recent improvements.

Even before the line officially opened, it seemed prone to accidents.

When Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and reporters rode one of the new buses during a publicity event before the launch, a motorist who ran a red light at one intersection forced the driver to stop dramatically.

As the accidents have piled up, so has blame between motorists and bus drivers.

"Oh, my goodness, we have to put a sign like the Target store on our bus. They are treating us like a target range," said Guingao Roldan, 56, an L.A. bus driver since 1990.

For their part, motorists contend that the silver buses, with their wind-swept profiles, are difficult to see.

The transit authority began installing strobe lights on the sides of the buses, but some critics say the buses need a color change.

Others have even demanded railroadlike crossing gates at the 36 intersections. But such a plan would cost \$18 million and could worsen traffic congestion, officials said.

Baylis, of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department, said authorities are helping remind drivers of the new bus line. So far, his agency has ticketed 600 motorists for moving violations involving the Orange Line, including 125 for running a red light and about 70 for failure to obey posted signs.

Officials this month announced they would install cameras at 12 intersections to photograph red-light scofflaws.

Despite the accidents, most passengers rave about the new line, including its landscaping, which often makes the bus way the only greenbelt in some parts of L.A.'s sprawl.

Waiting times are five minutes during peak hours and 10 to 15 minutes during off-peak, officials said.

The line features a bicycle and pedestrian path along the entire route and has free vehicle parking at several stops. The stops resemble mini-stations, with artwork and a text display counting the minutes for the next bus.

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