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## Dust-Up

### Traffic snarl: Debating L.A.'s congestion problem

What should Los Angeles be doing to solve the congestion problem? Should it be solved? All this week, Ted Balaker and Bart Reed debate traffic, transit, and mobility in Los Angeles.

March 19, 2007

*Today, Balaker and Reed look at possible city-, county-, and citizen-level solutions to the city's congestion crisis. Later this week they'll focus on subway extension and transit funding, building more roads and light rail, alternatives to traffic, and crazy ideas to fix the traffic problem.*

#### We need more light rail

By Bart Reed

Ted,

No one will deny that there is a congestion crisis in our city. Yet much of transportation planning for more than sixty years has been centered not merely on highways, but on the movement of vehicles, not individuals.

Taxpayer funds are spent on improving highways with the intent of accommodating more space for cars and trucks and little consideration about the needs of the people or goods that occupy them, nor the value of the roadway beneath for economic efficiency.

We must not forget that it is the passengers who have pressing matters to attend to at the workplace or school, not the vehicles that transport them. Future transportation improvements must move away from picturing how to better move mobile machines and idealize how to move people and goods.

Currently, Los Angeles County has Metro Rail and Metrolink, which handles about 300,000 boardings each weekday. What is in place right now, however, is still limited, with most major destinations such as Westwood and LAX still not served by rail.

For example, the San Fernando Valley has 8 rail stations with sparse service. Imagine an 80-mile rail corridor from [Chatsworth to Laguna Nigel](#) that would run rail service at 79 miles per hour. Orange County will be starting 30-minute service on their portion of the corridor in 2010, but where is Los Angeles County? In L.A. County, there is no citizen pressure, so there is no political will. We are content to spend billions to widen the parallel Interstate 5, but not \$100 million to upgrade the rail corridor that will easily carry more than the added freeway lanes.

With each new opening of a rail line come new passengers to public transportation and increased patronage on other lines of the bus and rail network. Many areas of the city and the county are clamoring for rail. However, limited funds at various levels of governments have hampered the speed at which our rail system has grown.

We are grateful that the Expo Line to Culver City (and eventually to Santa Monica) and the Eastside Gold Line will be opened within one year of each other, yet for 20 years we haven't acted to connect them together to allow a one-trip ride from Pasadena to USC.

Some may be concerned about the expense of rail, but we never figure out that the hundreds of billions of dollars we have invested in roads over the last 125 years still cannot do the job. However, it should be noted that it would be considerably more expensive to move the same number of people through new roads, which isn't a fair value for the taxpayer.

Also, rail lines, with much smaller right-of-ways, do not hog surrounding land. Much of the money spent on highway construction today goes into purchasing real estate, which permanently removes it from the tax rolls. Furthermore, it is possible to move many more people using less property with rail than moving the same number of people with significantly more property, as required with highway construction.

*Bart Reed is the executive director of [The Transit Coalition](#), a Sylmar based non-profit dealing with issues of transportation, mobility and land use planning.*

#### If we build it, they won't come

By Ted Balaker

Bart,

Maybe it's a tad dull to begin with a point of agreement, but you and I share the view that L.A. faces a congestion crisis. There are limits to how much time we can spend traveling, and that means when traffic congestion slows us down, we get stuck with fewer options. Congestion makes it harder for job seekers to find just the right job, so instead of enduring killer commutes, they often settle for lower-paying and less interesting work. The flip side is that labor pools shrink and businesses struggle to hire the best people. Congestion leaves businesses with fewer potential customers, and often it's the offbeat establishments—from art studios to [Uzbek restaurants](#)—that get walloped especially hard. Congestion wastes fuel, increases pollution, poses safety problems (think of the ambulance stuck in traffic), and frustrates dating life (are you "geographically

undesirable"?).

What to do? Here's where we part company. Transit agencies should focus on improving mobility for the poor and handicapped, but we should all realize that transit usually doesn't take enough cars off the road to have much impact on congestion.

Far from being shortchanged, transit budgets in Los Angeles continue to swell, and during recent decades L.A. officials have spent more than \$10 billion on light and heavy rail; they even constructed one of the nation's longest [commuter rail systems](#). Yet the percentage of L.A.-area commuters who use transit to get to work declined. Given the extra dough and the booming population, boosting transit ridership should have been an easy task, but [today's transit ridership](#) is actually lower than [it was 20 years ago](#).

Although it accounts for fewer than 5% of work trips and just [1.8%](#) of total travel, L.A. devotes [58% of planned spending](#) (\$67 billion) to transit. Yet transit is expected to carry only about 7% of rush-hour commuters by 2030. Private vehicles will account for the vast majority of the growth in travel, further straining our already clogged roads.

The reason few of us trade in our cars for transit passes is simple: Even with mounting congestion, car travel is usually faster than transit, and additional factors, like time spent getting to stations and waiting for transit vehicles, makes transit trips slower still. Transit commutes generally take about [twice as long](#) as car commutes. Even with the nation's most extensive transit system, metro New York transit commuters (I used to be one) endure the nation's longest commutes (52 minutes).

Part of the solution is (gasp!) expanding roadway capacity. That doesn't mean slathering the Southland with pavement. It means adding capacity strategically, creatively (with [tunnels](#), roads need not hog surrounding land), and with the help of toll-revenue financing. Let's squeeze as much performance out of our transportation network as possible (clear accidents faster, embrace road pricing, etc.) and encourage organic solutions, like [telecommuting](#).

There will always be plenty of car-vs.-transit squawking. But since bus trips account for about 85 percent of transit ridership, we should remember that transit users and motorists share a common enemy in traffic congestion.

*Ted Balaker is a policy analyst at Reason Foundation and co-author of the book "The Road More Traveled: Why the Congestion Crisis Matters More Than You Think and What We Can Do About It" (Rowman & Littlefield 2006).*

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