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Late train spoils one man's desire to use public transit

By: DAVE DOWNEY - Staff Writer

Michael Kennedy had the perfect plan for blowing town for the weekend without hassling with notorious Friday traffic.

The 68-year-old semiretired Mission Viejo surgeon, who teaches at USC's Keck School of Medicine, has a second home in Tucson and spends many weekends there.

"We'll probably eventually move over there when I finally hang up my spurs," Kennedy says.

It's a little far to drive for a weekend getaway, so he flies. And because there are no nonstop flights from Orange County's John Wayne Airport, Kennedy boards Southwest Airlines at Lindbergh Field.

At \$58, the price is right.

"That's a tank of gas," said Kennedy.

He even found a way to avoid driving. He parks at the Irvine train station, rides Amtrak to San Diego and takes a cab over to the airport terminal.

The train leaves at 5:06 p.m. and arrives in San Diego at 6:55, leaving an hour to catch the last plane for Tucson at 8 p.m.

The plan was working like clockwork.

Then a couple of Fridays ago, that southbound 5:06 was running a half hour late. Kennedy decided to hang tight. Thirty minutes later, passengers were informed the train was an hour late.

"At that point I could not wait for the train and still make my flight, so I dashed out and took off in my car," Kennedy said.

He threaded his way south on Interstate 5.

"I didn't dream that I would make it," he said. "I made it with five minutes to spare."

It could have turned out differently.

"One small fender-bender accident in Encinitas and I would have been history," Kennedy said.

For that reason, he is through with the train. From now on, he will drive.

Kennedy's experience underscores a challenge public transit officials face in persuading people to get out of their cars: Reliability. People won't ride if trains aren't on time, and if there aren't reliable alternatives when things go wrong.

He didn't know it at the time, but Kennedy had an alternative ---- sort of. He could have hopped on Metrolink (which serves Riverside, Orange and Los Angeles counties, among others). It would have dropped him in Oceanside. Then, assuming the train was on time, he would have had three minutes to catch the last Coaster train headed south.

"Historically, we haven't had very good connections between Metrolink and Coaster," said Tom Kelleher, spokesman for the North County Transit District.

With the late 2007 debut of the Sprinter line between Oceanside and Escondido, officials hope to better coordinate Coaster, Metrolink and Amtrak schedules. We can only hope they are successful.

Readers are encouraged to ask questions and submit ideas for commuter columns. Staff writer Dave Downey may be reached at (951) 676-4315, Ext. 5442, or ddowney@californian.com. For the latest traffic conditions, go to www.nctimes.com/traffic.