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Opinion Without more walkable cities, building new transit won't reverse Metro's ridership decline



Commuters disembark from the Expo Line at the downtown Santa Monica station, which opened to service in May. (Los Angeles Times)

By **Steven Higashide**

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There is no place in the country better positioned to use transit to its advantage than Los Angeles County. With the upcoming ballot measure that would increase the county sales tax to fund the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, the renaissance of downtown Los Angeles, the recent proliferation of development in built-up areas as opposed to outward sprawl, and the emerging consensus that road building won't magically make traffic go away, this decade is truly a watershed period in the region's history.

As Metro continues its ambitious construction effort, however, the transit agency and local governments should ask what exactly they want to achieve. If their goal is to offer a geographically impressive map of rail service 30 years from now, the plan will do that. Cities like Dallas followed this path and can now point to extensive lines that few people ride.

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But if the goal of Los Angeles' transit investments is more ambitious — to have buses and trains shape the region in the 21st century the way the automobile did in the 20th — building transit is not enough. For proof, look no further than Metro's overall ridership, which so far is 5.5% lower in 2016 than in 2015 despite two new rail extensions.

Increased ridership over the long term will be the single best way to measure whether transit is working for Angelenos. "Who's On Board," a new TransitCenter report that gathered data from three focus groups and a survey of 3,000 people in 17 metro areas in the United States, sheds light on how it can be done.

The first major issue to address is access to bus stops and rail stations. Though each new rail line has brought complaints from residents who say Metro has not provided enough parking, our survey shows that most people who take transit typically walk to it. In fact, 80% of people who use transit frequently for multiple purposes typically access it on foot and not by car. On the new portion of the Expo Line, for example, most of the parking lots do not fill to capacity during rush hour even though ridership has been impressive. It's a sign that the line is doing exactly what it should — encouraging people to walk to transit — but it also indicates a habitual tendency to overstate the needs of motorists.

In short, transit thrives in good pedestrian environments. For all the talk about using Uber, Lyft and bike share to bridge the "first mile, last mile" gap to transit, it's far more important to put bus and rail stops in places where people don't have to walk a mile or more to reach them. Transit needs to be in the middle of the action, not sent to the edge of town. New housing, offices, and retail should be concentrated near it.

This means Metro must work with cities — especially Los Angeles — not only to invest in safe crosswalks and sidewalks, but also to reform land-use regulations to nurture inviting walking environments. As [another Times opinion piece noted](#), Los Angeles is a major global city whose zoning codes, parking requirements and development politics treat it like an enormous suburb. For transit to succeed, those laws and attitudes must change.



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Already, we are seeing the effect of walkable stations in the ridership differences between the Expo and Gold Line extensions. Stations on the former are in relatively dense neighborhoods, so it should come as no surprise that weekday ridership on the line has soared nearly 50% in the months since it opened. The latter is located in a more sprawling part of the region, and the ridership gain there has been more modest.

Where buses are concerned, our survey found that adding shelters to bus stops significantly improves customer satisfaction. Survey respondents rated this amenity even more important than improving on-time performance, reducing crowding, eliminating transfers or moving the bus stop closer to their house -- and far more important than adding Wi-Fi or power outlets. An excellent [investigative report](#) by KPCC found that poor contract management led to a “virtual collapse” of the L.A. city government’s bus shelter installation program, leaving riders at hundreds of stops completely unprotected from the elements.

Improving the pedestrian environment around transit, however, is only half of the equation. In our survey, the people who were most satisfied with transit — whether buses or trains — were those who had access to lines that were frequent and fast. When transit arrives often, moves quickly and connects people to many destinations, many people will ride it. Transit that comes once an hour and takes passengers on a circuitous and time-consuming journey will be the mode of last resort; whether it’s a bus or a train matters little.

In Los Angeles, it’s not clear that the region’s substantial investment in transit infrastructure has brought about as broad an effort to ensure high-frequency service. Metro’s “vehicle revenue hours” — one measurement of how much service the system offers — peaked nine years ago at 8.27 million per year and declined to 8.01 million per year in 2015. In that time, rail service increased by 360,000 hours but was outweighed by a 610,000-hour decrease in bus service. The parts of Los Angeles that have seen reduced bus service are not necessarily the same areas where rail service has been expanded. As Angelenos well know, the county’s investment gap between bus and rail has been a persistent issue. For a decade, Metro operated under a federal consent decree after riders sued the agency for investing heavily in rail while neglecting bus lines. Once the decree was lifted in 2006, bus service promptly declined.

To Metro’s credit, the agency seems aware of the benefits that a fast, frequent bus system would bring. Last year, [Streetsblog LA](#) reported that the board of directors was considering a substantial network redesign similar to the recent one in Houston, which has boosted ridership in that sprawling city. But Metro appears to have made no progress on the matter.

There’s no magic bullet for transit, but TransitCenter’s survey findings point to some simple steps for Metro and local governments to follow. Where good transit service already exists, the agency should work with

cities to make land-use and pedestrian improvements that encourage people to live and work within walking distance of it. And the top priority for new transit expansion should be busy destinations that are already walkable. By making transit frequent and fast and building walkable neighborhoods around transit, Los Angeles can make it a practical choice for many more people.

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