

COMMENTARY

Editorials, letters, columns and other opinions

What Really Matters in Rebuilding Our Transportation System



COMMENTARY

Gary H. London

I like the feeling of movement, whether in my car, on my bike, by Segway or even walking. It just seems that lately we spend a lot more time crawling slowly to our destination than actually moving.

Virtually no one

argues that our current transportation system is in need of an upgrade. Yet, already a lot of money has been spent, and more is about to be spent to accommodate the close to 1½ million daily commuters who overload our regional transportation system.

The fear is that all of this money that has already been spent in this region to expand the freeway network, adding dedicated express commuter lanes, building toll roads, running the fixed-rail Coaster and, of course, the San Diego Trolley, has not been effective in reducing congestion. We are still congested, particularly during the commute hours.

Each of these transportation solutions is dedicated to accommodating our growing region — San Diego County is projected to add 500,000 workers to the employment base during the next 40 years — and the expectation we all share that we should be able to move safely and efficiently during our commutes to and from work and during the workday to conduct our business.

When it comes to transportation programs, the solutions I fear the most are those that cost the estimated \$41 billion to \$57 billion (2030 Regional Transportation Plan) and don't get us anywhere.

Column Series About Transportation

This is the first of an occasional series on transportation issues in San Diego. This column sets the stage. I will not detail all that is planned. Instead, I will attempt to outline what really matters.

I also have a bias: Transportation solutions should focus on how they intersect with land-use patterns. San Diego is a modern, dispersed region with multiple centers of business activity and housing. A region like this is very difficult to connect via various alternative transportation systems, except, in the way it is substantially connected: by roadways. As a result, our freeway system has been the focus of most of our transportation investment, and it has worked very well.

For most of the 20th century we had a lot more freeway space than we needed. The San Diego region was a place where you could get almost anywhere in about 30 minutes.

Now that has changed. The scramble of late on the part of the San Diego Association of Governments, or SANDAG, and the Metropolitan Transit System, as well as the myriad of local, regional, state and federal policymakers has been to figure out ways to upgrade the system. Initially, we built more freeways when we needed them. What has usually bothered me about this approach is that in the pro-



File photo
The Coaster fixed-rail system is one solution to alleviating traffic on congested roadways.

cess of building those freeways, we then opened up new areas for development that filled up the freeway space, again.

Cheap Solutions to Traffic Issues

I also believe that many of the region's transportation issues, at least during the next two or three decades, are solvable through relatively cheap changes in behavior, not in giant, costly infrastructure. Try these on:

- **Live Close to Work:** The basis of better transportation for most is to not have a need for it in the first place. If you are able to live close to work you don't need to access the system, at least not for very long or very far. If you happen to be able to accomplish that, a Segway, scooter, bike, your feet, or a short bus or trolley ride often work better than a car.

- **Tolling:** Being smart about tolling can dramatically alter a driver's behavior. A transponder — the kind already in place for use on the toll roads — can be an attachment on all cars. We can charge tolls to drivers traveling during the most congested periods; but we can also pay drivers when they commute outside of those hours. We could reward or penalize companies, also, to encourage alternative start and stop work hours. My guess is this single fix would reduce congestion.

- **Technology:** Lexus, Infiniti and other luxury auto manufacturers are now offering cars in which cruise control detects the car in front of you and adjusts your speed accordingly; and detects the side curb to facilitate your parking. These same manufacturers are a nano moment away from freeway lane detection. And probably only a few years away from computer control of your driving. When that moment arrives, a lot more cars can fit the same road space because they can travel much closer together. The only problem to solve then is where you are going to park them.

- **Bus Expansion:** Some cities around the world have been using buses and innovative dedicated transportation corridors called "Quickways" to move people fast and flexibly. While it involves no investment in rails, it does require dedicated roads, which can be expensive. But this solution is not nearly as expensive as fixed-rail systems.

Eliminate Old-World Solutions

Many tout fixed-rail transit as a big part of our transportation future. Yet, nothing could be more 19th century than trains, at least in spread out, relatively low-density cities like San Diego. Proponents argue that San Diego will not always be this way. Maybe they will be right, but not for at least 30 years.

Few things are more burdensome than a slow, stop-and-start train system that doesn't capture the heart of the commuting population.

The San Diego Trolley, although attractive and compelling, is of limited value to the transportation needs of most San Diegans. Currently, of the millions of trips San Diegans and border-crossers make on a given day, it only carries about 110,000 of them. Its most active lines run from downtown to South Bay, a line that arguably does not carry many business people who are otherwise able to afford a car.

A lot more trolley tracks would be needed to reach more commuters. One, called the Mid-Coast Light Rail, is in the final stages of design. At a projected cost of over \$1.2 billion, the idea is to link up the University Towne Center/UC San Diego area to the trolley system.

Fine. But it is not going to get most people out of their cars. This is not Chicago, Manhattan, the San Francisco Bay Area or Washington, D.C. And even in those places the trains run FAST.

Commuters Look for Efficiency

The one fixed-rail that does seem to work is the Coaster. That's principally because it is faster and more direct. And because of that, it serves a much higher percentage of professional and corporate employees than does the trolley. Unfortunately, the Coaster is also hugely subsidized, with relatively few runs during the day.

Another fixed-rail system that would likely work is the proposed Maglev system that would link San Diego to Los Angeles and San Francisco. That's a long ride. If we can get there almost as fast as the whole airplane process, it makes sense. But that is an inter-regional system designed to compete with the airplane. Its attraction is the very reason why fixed-rail within a region is more problematic: It doesn't have to stop, thereby slowing down the commute.

It's all about speed, efficiency and experience. It is not an accident why the auto has captured the bulk of our commutes for about a century now. The problem is that the auto, as we know it, is in jeopardy as a commuter carrier, regardless of whether it is large or small, gas or hybrid.

The region needs to go multi-modal. The only real issue is, what is the wisest approach?

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