

Transportation Fix that Isn't (Better to Dig A Hole)

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The Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA) recently received the report of a Cal State Fullerton contracted study on the economic benefits of the CenterLine project. Taking account of established economic multiplier factors, it found that for the \$2.1 billion construction and initial operation expenditure, the project would pump some \$3.2 billion into the county economy. OCTA Chairman Spitzer was quoted as saying CenterLine is “not just a transportation project. It is an economic engine”.

But before we all get carried away by the prospects of this incredible money machine, it would be well to understand in a little more detail what the study really did and did not say. The study specifically reported *only* the impact of purchasing and employment for the construction and operation. It explicitly did *not* study the impact of transportation benefits, direct or indirect. The economic multipliers used were those common to *any* large civil engineering project, for instance, digging and filling a \$2.1 billion hole in the ground. Such a “Hole” project would be expected to provide about the same economic multiplier and return to the county.

Ironically, if transportation impacts *had* been taken into account the Hole would have a *more* beneficial effect than CenterLine. How is this possible? Therein lies a significant story, the dirty little secret of CenterLine.

CenterLine takes most of its Right-of-Way (ROW) from some of the busiest arterial streets in Orange County. Even in its elevated version this takes at least one lane of street capacity for the stanchion footings. As it turns out, the street capacity lost by that lane taken for ROW, is *more* than the effective capacity afforded by the new rail ridership. The result is a net *loss* of regional capacity and inevitably, increased overall congestion, emissions and energy consumption.

This is independently confirmed by the documented environmental impacts analysis which in its objective, quantitative results (contrary to the executive summary) finds street congestion, intersection congestion, air-quality, and travel-time all literally *worse* in the CenterLine alternative than the no-build alternative; that is, worse than doing nothing at all. While the energy analysis found a small annual operating energy reduction, only a tiny fraction of the much larger up-front construction energy would ever be recovered over the lifetime of the project.

These adverse OCTA findings are all fully referenced and explained in detail at <www.urbantransport.org/ten.pdf>.

The environmental analysis itself provides this astonishing summary:

“Compared to the No Build Alternative, all build alternatives would have more adverse impacts on the environment (without mitigation) for traffic circulation, displacements, public services, visual quality, cultural resources, noise/vibration, hazardous materials, water resources, natural resources, parks/trails, and environmental justice. Mitigation measures are proposed to reduce these impacts.”

The “without mitigation” term here needs some explanation. At the time of the latest environmental assessment, measures to reduce or eliminate CenterLine’s adverse traffic impacts, had been proposed, but not yet designed, nor costs estimated. Thus the impacts analysis was done without such mitigation measures and reflects the full, adverse impacts of Centerline itself (“without mitigation”). Ironically, the only way these adverse impacts could possibly be mitigated would be to acquire new right-of-way and build new *road* capacity to replace that lost to CenterLine. If this were feasible, it surely would demand the question: wouldn’t we be better off to build *only* the mitigating road capacity, and skip the CenterLine and its net adverse impacts?

Practically, such full mitigation will not occur. It would require, among other things, acquiring, through condemnation as necessary, some 16 miles of essentially contiguous, street-front right-of-way, along the above named highly developed commercial major arterial streets. The cost of such acquisition including legal defense, all assumed by OCTA to be borne by the cities, is perhaps incalculable but probably more than that of CenterLine itself. So we are stuck with those adverse impacts.

The final irony is that the \$2.1 billion to be spent on the counter-productive light rail project, added to an already top-heavy transit allocation, according to the OCTA’s long range financial plan, would consume 84% of the next 20-year available transportation funding, leaving only 16% for our already badly under-capacity highways system, nowhere near enough to keep up with the projected 43% growth in demand.

CenterLine is a multi-billion dollar waste that will literally make Orange County traffic congestion and travel-times worse. The unprecedented congestion that we otherwise could have largely alleviated with those billions of dollars will be the true, lasting legacy of CenterLine.

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