

Orange County Transport Perspective

Ch. 1. INTRODUCTION

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This is the first of a planned series of short essays (shooting for 10 minutes read time each) about how we might do a better job of Orange County Urban Transportation.

Our congestion problem is bad and headed worse. It has been estimated that congestion is now costing Orange Countians 120 million person-hours, or about \$2 billion per year¹. Modest transportation capacity improvements provide some temporary relief but are soon overwhelmed by continuing travel growth, and the failure of our overall transportation system capacity to keep up. In other words, we've been fighting – at best — a strategic retreat.

In *principal* the solution is clear: *just (!)* build enough transportation *capacity* to meet present *demand* and continue to do so as necessary to keep up with growth. Today, our county demand is about 107 million person-miles/day, growing at just under 1% per year in the past 13 years. However, our county total system capacity, the lane-miles of road, the transit ridership etc, is only enough to support about 76% of that at a nominal, US Median level of congestion. The resulting 31% overload is the direct cause and a meaningful measure of our regional congestion.²

Other kinds of infrastructure, water, sewers, power, etc, all have the same problem but they do keep up with growth — they have to. If they didn't the result would be almost instantaneous disaster. We'd quickly be dieing of thirst, sewers backing up in our homes, and no power in the summer, all instant attention getters. There's very little slack or elasticity in those systems.

But transportation is different. It has immense elasticity. Every year when growth overloads our transportation system a little bit more, congestion just gets a little bit worse. Right now, our nationally most congested region (Los Angeles Metropolitan area of which we are a part) , is about 44% overloaded (relative to the US median). But it still works — sort of — though at significant cost in lost time and tempers. It's the death of a thousand cuts. We're getting used to it, and that's both a blessing and a curse.

The job of our transportation planners in trying to fix the system is unenviable. We're severely resource-limited, most particularly with respect to funding, and lately, right-of-way, and political will. In that circumstance it's understandable, that planners fall back to grasping at straws, looking for magic

¹ Texas Transportation Institute methodology.

² The technical definition of regional volume and regional capacity and relation to regional congestion are developed and illustrated in a companion paper, "A Regional Congestion Model.

bullets, “new”, “visionary”, “more choices” and an “alternative to the automobile” which may seem not to be working.

This situation is not new. It’s been with us for about 30 years since the beginning in California of Governor J. Brown’s “Era of Limits”. That’s when we quit building adequate roads and started experimenting with more creative solutions, “travel-demand-management”, “Carpool lanes”, mandatory employer sanctions on single drivers , Regulation 15,. etc, anything and everything to get people out of their cars. And despite all those efforts, Average Vehicle Occupancy (AVO) is less now than it was then. Projects in progress at the time which would have built 50% more capacity for greater Los Angeles (and essentially resolved our current shortfall) were actually cancelled and their rights-of-way sold.

Recently, under the influence of massive Federal Transit Authority (FTA) subsidies the search for more creative answers has largely been turned to transit and particularly light rail, essentially a resurrection in modern streamlined dress of the obsolete streetcars of the 1920’s and 30’s.

The one thing all these visionary approaches had in common is the abandonment of accrued wisdom as to which alternatives work best in favor of unfettered vision and creativeness. In spite of the embarrassingly poor performance of light rail nationally and in study after study in Orange County (to be detailed in ensuing chapters), the proposed Measure M Extension Expenditure Plan still refers to it obliquely, but euphemistically, in at least six instances, suggesting that “visionary rail system” proposals would be received warmly in the competitive local project proposals

We don’t need more creative, visionary solutions. For practical purposes there are none — they’ve all been tried, and failed to make a dent in the urban congestion problem. Without disparaging innovation efforts at *some* level, OCTA in particular is in no position to do such long-shot, experimental research and development. What we do need is to fully understand the abundant, documented history that has been laid out for us about which measures, (highways, bus, commuter rail, light rail, etc) can provide the most congestion reducing capacity within our limited resources and the political will to provide those minimum essential resources, and implement those measures that work.

If we can do those things, we *can* build our way out of our smothering congestion.

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The remaining essays in this series will look into the lessons that we should have taken from several recent national and OC learning opportunities:

- #2. The National Transportation Database of experience.
- #3. The 1997 Orange County Corridor MIS Study
- #4 The 1999 and 2000 CenterLine Light Rail EIR
- #5 The 2003 CenterLine EIR
- #6 Implications for Measure M Extension