

# The Only Solution for Congestion

A Commentary by Jack Mallinckrodt  
Orange County Register, March 6, 2003

Urban transportation in California is in bad shape and getting worse. The greater Los Angeles urban area (including Orange County) is ranked as having the nation's worst congestion, with average travel-time double what it would be in normal conditions - 33 percent worse than 20 years ago. The estimated cost to the regional economy of travel-time delays is now \$12.6 billion per year. The most recent Orange County Survey ranked traffic congestion a more serious concern than jobs, the economy, schools or crime.

Why this alarming increase in congestion? Technically, the reason is clear: inadequate capacity to support our travel volume. Studies show Orange County has a level of traffic that's 32 percent greater than the traffic that our system of roads, buses and rail could handle with the moderate congestion seen in an average U.S. city.

Shouldn't this have been foreseen by transportation planners? As a matter of fact, it was. Before 1975, planners saw where we were headed and began making freeway and right-of-way plans, even some initial construction, which, if completed, would have essentially met our capacity needs to this day.

Unfortunately, about 1975, politicians and planners began to embrace the idea that we were in an "era of limits" - the notion that there were "smarter solutions," that "we can't just keep on building more roads," that "transportation demand management" could help wean Californians off their irrational "love affair with the automobile" and into "modern, efficient, high-capacity mass transit."

Then-governor Jerry Brown's aides openly proclaimed, "Our job is to pry John Q. Public out of his car (and) to make life miserable for the single motorist." Sound transportation planning was abandoned, rights-of-way sold and projects under way canceled. We set forth looking for magic, painless solutions. We tried them all; none worked and now here we are. The obvious lesson to be learned: that expanding freeways worked well in limiting congestion before 1975 but that "demand management" efforts since then have been a monumental failure.

Light rail is the current apple in the eye of the Orange County Transportation Authority, even though the agency's own analysis found that it would actually make congestion worse, not better. By taking right-of-way from some of the county's most heavily traveled streets, light rail would reduce street-traffic capacity by more than the minuscule volume of traffic (less than 0.25 percent of the total) that it would divert. The net effect: increased congestion at every one of the more than 100 links and intersections at which specific impacts were calculated.

This sort of statistic shouldn't be surprising. On a national average basis, for a given funding, roads provide over 40 times more capacity and associated reduction of congestion, emissions, energy consumption and accidents than light rail. That, and the automobile's immensely greater personal and commercial efficiency; is why 98 percent of county travel involves public roads and private vehicles and only 2 percent is supported by our heavily subsidized mass transit, bus and rail.

Automobile opponents make much of so-called "hidden costs" of roads such as emissions and land use. But again the facts say otherwise. OCTA's own studies found that in Orange County, funds spent on roads result in five times as much reduction of emissions as money spent on light rail. Further, national average statistics show that for comparable capacity, light rail would take five times as much land as freeways. Light rail is a profligate waste of both land and money.

The bottom line is obvious: If we really want to avoid far longer commuting times, average freeway speeds less than 20 mph, increased pollution and the endless urban sprawl generated by the escapees from such mass immobility; we can and we must build adequate new and expanded roads and freeways. There simply is no rational alternative.