

Is Rail Worth It? Essays by Martin Wachs and Ethan Elkind

Editor's introduction by Elizabeth Mattiuzzi

Much has been made recently of Los Angeles's transformation to a transit-friendly city. A speaker at this spring's Transit & Cities conference at UC Berkeley, hosted by the Institute of Urban and Regional Development, lamented the increasingly prohibitive housing prices in Downtown LA, even as there is demand for commuters to live closer to work and spend less time in their cars. Yet the traditional view of transit riders of "necessity" versus "choice" pits low-income bus riders against more affluent rail riders and raises questions about the much higher cost per rider of rail. What can planning scholars and practitioners do to inform and enlighten the political process around rail and bus development? What are the metrics by which we should evaluate investment in different forms of transit infrastructure before and after it is built? What should be the relationship between equity, cost, and political feasibility? The BPJ editors posed these questions to Professor Martin Wachs of UCLA and Professor Ethan Elkind of UC Berkeley after their recent IURD Transit & Cities lecture on Elkind's 2014 book, *Railtown: The Fight for the Los Angeles Metro Rail and the Future of the City* (UC Press). The talk focused on the history of rail politics in LA and served as a useful springboard for further discussion in this journal on the role of planners today in promoting equitable mobility in cities.

Making Cities Whole Requires Whole Transportation Systems, by Martin Wachs

Cities function efficiently and equitably when served by well-planned transit systems integrally embedded in their context of streets, highways, land use, and other elements of their comprehensive plans. American cities are investing a larger share of their resources in transit than at any time since the invention of the automobile, yet many of these investments are yielding disappointing results.

The two main movement systems of cities should complement one another and work toward the same mobility goals. We measure the success of transit investments by how much voters and politicians are willing to spend on them and by ridership volumes. We once regarded dollar investments in freeways and daily traffic as measures of success, but today we cite those measures to illustrate the failure of an auto-centric system. It is unwise to view cars and trains as opposites; in the best cities they work in partnership. The metrics are handy ways of measuring current political success, and surely priorities change from decade to decade. But the systems being built today will long outlive current political deals and disagreements. They should be based on a foundation that measures more lasting value.

How might highways and transit work together to enhance the range of economic, social, and educational opportunities in cities and improve the urban environment? The extent to which they approach this ideal is the best test of transportation success. Building transit lines is not an end in itself any more than was building streets and highways, especially in a city that already has well-developed street and highway networks upon which transit systems can capitalize. Transit is not an antidote to autodependency, but complements autos, bicycles, and walking. All are needed to increase travel options in a society that will rely on multiple modes of travel for decades to come.

Planning, building, and operating public transit systems and freeways in the past have been left to transportation planners and engineers who have done their best given their isolation from influence over the other systems of the city. Viewed more holistically, transit and highways should be seen as the bones of a great city, and metrics by which they are evaluated need to be far subtler than spending and ridership.

Many American cities, committed to building transit and seeing results as soon as possible, have built rail lines where they have met the least political resistance—for example, in the medians of freeways and on abandoned rail rights-of-way. Politicians practice the art of placing rail and bus routes

where they could best avoid citizen outrage. Busways were built where they “worked,” rail was too expensive, or communities were hostile to it. But busways are superior to rail as transport facilities in some contexts and inferior in others. How tragic it is that Los Angeles has operated an expensive and marginal “Green Line” rail service for decades where a busway would have been superior and cheaper while it hopes to have rail service in its strongest rail-oriented Wilshire Corridor by 2036. Paths of least resistance were followed when locating and sizing urban freeways after World War II, yet many rail advocates promote similar decisions without noticing that they are repeating the errors of those highway planners whom they criticize vociferously.

Boards of education seeking new school sites routinely look for cheap and available land, most often finding it away from transit routes. They save money by eliminating school buses, giving parents little choice but to drive kids to school and, once in their cars, continue driving to work. Transit and school location should be coordinated, but education and transit officials rarely work together. Similar tales could be told of hospitals and the travel of patients and of sports franchises and their fans. Such linkages make or break the financial success of transit, and failure to make them has caused cities to seek higher transit subsidies through regressive sales and property taxes that would be less needed if planning could be more effectively integrated.

Employers, including many whose worksites are adjacent to transit routes, offer ample free parking to their employees who must pay to travel on transit, so those systems must counter by keeping fares lower than would be economically rational and by building thousands of free parking spaces at transit terminals to tease drivers out of their cars. This imposes higher costs and fares on their most loyal riders. By setting the wrong priorities and using the wrong metrics, decision makers fail to provide adequate affordable service for carless people, students, and retired people, all of whom are by their circumstances far more inclined to using transit. Rational policymakers would tie parking policy to transit investment.

Public transportation has a central role to play in creating the future American metropolis but demands more of planners and politicians. Citizens increasingly use computer apps and maps to better choose destinations and integrate travel by many means, including walking, biking, short-term car rentals and bikes, buses, rail lines, and automobiles. Travel options complement one another to improve the quality of urban life, use energy more efficiently, and lessen barriers to education, employment, health care, and recreation that exist when people are not mobile. If individual travelers can plan activities, their locations, and travel in an integrated manner on a smartphone, it is our responsibility to plan for their options and opportunities in a similarly coordinated way.

Doing this well is complex and challenging. The role of the university is to address this complexity in courses and research so that it is understood and harnessed rather than ignored or even denied.

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The Rail and Land-Use Disconnect, by Ethan Elkind

If you build it, they will come. That has been the mantra of rail planners in selling this relatively expensive form of transit since at least the last half of the twentieth century. But in practice, too many rail transit systems serve woefully underdeveloped neighborhoods, with little hope of attracting new development. Scholars and practitioners need to change this dynamic in order to avoid wasting rail transit investments and increasing inequities in how we provide and pay for transit.

As a rule, rail transit is only worthwhile to build if there is a commitment by political leaders to channel future growth around and along these rail stations and corridors. Real-estate development and consumer preference trends over the past decade indicate that consumers increasingly want to live, work, and play in convenient, walkable, and bikable neighborhoods connected to rail. The suburban dream of yesterday now appeals to a smaller share of the market, while millennials and members of the fast-growing Latino demographic increasingly support transit investments and look less favorably on larger-lot homes that require long, tiring, expensive commutes.

Fortunately for those concerned about the health of the planet, these trends coincide with an overarching environmental need to reduce driving miles in order to reduce the loss of open space and agricultural land and air pollution—most critically the greenhouse gas emissions that cause climate change. One-third of these emissions nationwide, and almost 40 percent in California, comes from transportation.

Yet despite market demand and environmental need, building rail is not enough to spur compact higher-density neighborhoods. Without that growth around rail (or the ability to serve existing high-density pockets), the systems fail to achieve high ridership. That failure in turn means greater operating expenses, which cost taxpayer dollars and deplete both political and economic resources to pay for future expansions of the system as well as other transit, like buses. It also means a wasted opportunity from the billions invested in rail.

So why isn't building rail enough?

First, planners often run rail lines through low-density blighted areas in order to save costs. The alternative, tunneling underneath densely populated areas, is expensive, with high real-estate acquisition costs, complicated utility relocations, and costly tunneling equipment and procedures. But these blighted areas generally cannot attract private capital for real-estate projects by themselves. Some form of public investment is often necessary to spark a rebirth, often with a pioneer "catalytic" development project. Unfortunately, most municipal governments lack the funds or political will to make these investments.

Second, when rail lines travel through desirable neighborhoods where strong demand exists for new real-estate development, well-heeled and sophisticated residents in these areas often ensure that no new development can proceed. These homeowners' groups have proven deft at organizing, litigating, and otherwise influencing their local elected officials to resist new projects, usually through tight land-use controls.

Scholars and practitioners need to counter this dynamic through better policies and messaging to the public. As a start, they need to recognize the political reality that rail is more politically popular than buses. Rail is perceived as a pleasant and modern way to get around, while most people associate buses with crowded, dirty, unpleasant conditions. Advocates have successfully tapped into this sentiment to achieve voter approval on rail funding measures. From BART in the San Francisco Bay Area to MARTA in Atlanta to Metro Rail in Los Angeles, voters have responded to big rail transit visions to solve their seemingly insurmountable traffic and sprawl problems. By contrast, recommending low-cost options like buses captures few people's imagination. As a result, many pro-bus academic recommendations are often politically infeasible and therefore largely irrelevant.

Instead, scholars and practitioners need to better link land-use development to transit infrastructure. They should support policies that require density (or local plans to enable density) around transit stations and corridors. Such requirements at the federal and/or state levels could change the rail and land-use decision-making dynamic for local officials, whom otherwise might be easily influenced by well-resourced constituents at the expense of the regional good. The requirements could also deprive local groups of litigation opportunities to slow, stop, or drive up the costs of rail and related development.

Planners and practitioners should also advocate for nonrail options that can catalyze land-use changes, such as bus-rapid transit systems on bus-only lanes. These lower-cost transit modes can be as clean, fast,

and reliable as rail. Advocates need to communicate these benefits as an antidote to the negative bus stereotype.

Finally, practitioners need to incorporate affordable housing as a critical piece of transit-oriented development policies. Rail-connected neighborhoods should be mixed income, in part to ensure equitable access to opportunities but also to mitigate any gentrification or other negative impacts from the advent of rail and related land-use policies in existing neighborhoods.

Ultimately, without this concerted effort to address the land-use and rail challenges simultaneously, rail systems are doomed to mediocrity at best—and failure at worst.

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