

Caltrans Trims Vacant Buses, Plans New Ones

Responding to financial concerns and a July 9 letter from TRAC Board Member Dan McNamara, Caltrans announced last month that it would cease service on Surf-Solvang and Fresno-Porterville bus feeder routes. Each of these routes carried fewer than two passengers per bus. To coordinate with other Amtrak schedule changes, the routes made their last runs on September 2.

Solvang, Lompoc and Visalia, the three most popular stops on the two routes, will continue to be served through alternate Amtrak bus feeders that link them more conveniently to trains. Lompoc will continue to have bus departures to Santa Barbara at 9:50am and 12:01pm as well as a Surfliner train departure at 7:55am.

Visalia will continue to have bus departures to Hanford at 10:50am and 6:20pm, at least until October 28. The Visalia-Hanford route is also under financial review because only 35 percent of bus trips carried even a single Amtrak passenger in FY 2003.

Six additional Caltrans feeder bus routes continue to lose money in violation of Gov. Code Section 14035.2(a)(3), but Caltrans has promised to address this problem and to do direct mail marketing in bus markets, the only medium with a good prospect of finally helping some of these marginal routes.

The most positive aspect of the bus reform is that savings realized from the two cuts are enough to fund startup costs of another San Francisco-Santa Barbara feeder to the Pacific Surfliners. Caltrans is said to be considering whether that service should start in October or wait for another possible train extension to San Obispo in the spring.

"We are very pleased by the Caltrans' willingness to zero in on the problem and fix it," said TRAC Executive Director Alan C. Miller, "because there are many other areas where the same rational approach could boost revenues. State trains need that same kind of focus and attention."

"It was perhaps understandable that the overworked managers never had time to look at the details of buses," said Board Member Dan McNamara, "but this had the effect of hurting performance of the whole network, as needless money-losing buses created a \$1.5 million drag on the very sector created in the 1980's as a way to cut train losses."

"In the current budget environment, we don't see any room for bus service to become entitlements to particular cities or bus operators," said McNamara. "We are very happy Caltrans took this step as a positive initiative, because it could have been an issue for the anti-rail crowd if it waited any longer."

STUDY OF L.A. RAIL CROSS-LINKS

The Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transit Authority has approved a Short Range Plan which includes a feasibility study for a key interconnecting line. The "Downtown (Los Angeles) Light Rail Connector" would connect the Gold Line (East LA and Pasadena/Claremont) on one side with Long Beach Blue Line and Expo/Santa Monica on the other.

The plan is not controversial and was well received by Boardmembers. TRAC Vice-President Roger Christensen spoke in support of the agenda item. "Of all the future LA rail projects" Christensen said, "you could not find a mile and a half of rail that offers more bang for the buck than the Connector."

He further noted that it should be called the "the Regional Connector" rather than the "Downtown Connector." (Note: It is now being called the "Metro Center Connector.")

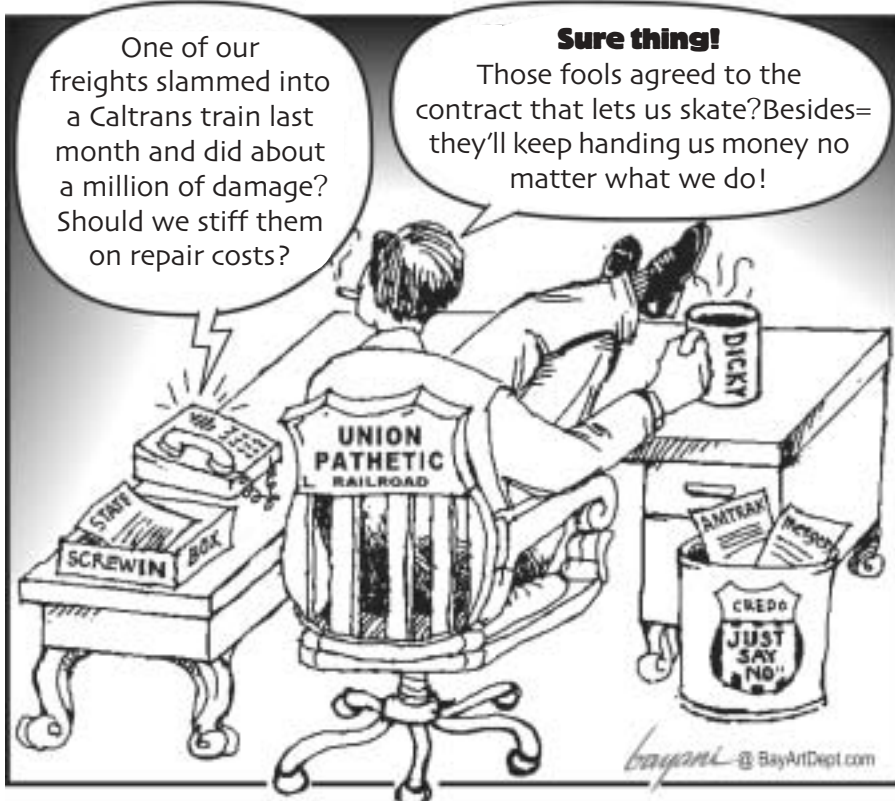
The study on this plan puts the project on the radar screen and makes it likely to appear as a construction project on the next Long Range Plan. A decade ago a similar plan existed but it was essentially a tunnel through Downtown LA.

Now that the future Little Tokyo Station of the Gold Line East project will be above ground, many believe the cut-and-cover Blue Line at 7th and Flower could portal up to the surface and run an essentially above ground connection to Little Tokyo. Little by little, L.A.'s rail lines could become a network.

Coast Observations

BRITISH PRIVATE RAIL OPERATORS are burning up \$2.2 billion in taxpayer operating subsidies annually, twice as much as British Rail ever received, on top of billions of dollars of rail capital costs underwritten by taxpayers. Root cause of the British failure was "over-optimism" of privateers who "believed that the state-owned British Rail was run so inefficiently that they would be able to slash spending" according to a British analyst... KIDS RIDE FREE—THEY DON'T RUN FREE, according to a recent PA announcement on a heavily kidded weekend Capitol. One of the more thoughtful conductors asks parents to enforce no running because kids or other passengers may be hurt if the train hits a bump (as it does several times a mile)... SACRAMENTO LRT SOUTH LINE STARTS revenue operation September 28, according to Regional Transit, but the agency looks set to repeat mistakes of 1987 when it tried to cordon off bus routes from light rail and put in new buses competing with trains. The Amtrak station extension originally promised for last year now will wait until 2005... A THREAT TO AMTRAK SOUTH LAKE TAHOE FEEDER BUSES as low ridership from years of non-promotion, service cuts, and week-end exceptions may further trim the state network in October. Ironically, the route was assigned to the Capitol Corridor because of its geography, but was at one time a good revenue producer for the San Joaquins, a fact that may motivate Caltrans to reinstate a redesigned Tahoe connection... THIS MONTH IS CRITICAL to Amtrak's future funding, with Congress making final budget adjustments. Please write or send an e-mail to your Senators and Member of Congress NOW to assure you can ride next year to: Hon. _____, House of Representatives, Washington DC 20515 or Sen. _____, Senate Office Building, Washington DC 20510. At www.capitoladvantage.com you can enter your zip code and get the name of your member of congress, then click to send an e-mail...

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