

WILL L.A. BUY TOM DELAY'S MAGIC BUSWAY?

by Roger Christensen
TRAC Vice-President

As hordes of rail enthusiasts mobbed the new Gold Line to Pasadena this summer, few noticed an alarming rail graveyard scene a few miles west in the San Fernando Valley. All along the MTA-owned Burbank Branch of the former Southern Pacific, pulled-up rails awaited removal. The rail right-of-way will be paved over by 2005 to become a freeway

RECEPTION SPOTTY ON L.E.D. SIGNS

WHEN THE PROJECT WAS ANNOUNCED to have realtime train information signs on all Capitol Corridor platforms, riders were enthusiastic. The implementation of the system has, however, left a lot to be desired... OVERHEARD RECENTLY ON THE DAVIS platform: "After 9 minutes, I have decided that their definition of "arriving" is different than ours."... AT BERKELEY ON 9/5/03 the seven people waiting for Train 738 (4:09pm to Sacramento) were finally encouraged at about 4:20pm to see the sign's prediction change from 4:19pm arrival to "738 DEST: AUB TRAIN ARRIV'G."... 15 MINUTES LATE WAS FINE. However, the sign kept saying this intermittently all the way through southbound 741's arrival and departure, thoroughly confusing the novice riders for both trains, and annoying the conductor on 741... AN HOUR LATER, 738 had vanished from the sign permanently, although passengers had finally learned after three cell phone and two pay phone calls that 738 was really stuck behind a stalled, broken apart UP freight train south of Oakland ... THE NEXT LED MIS-INFORMATION was "742 DEST: SAC TRAIN ARRIV'G" because it was really 738 coming in. That panicked the Auburn and Roseville passengers, as well as latecomers for 742. Now that information signs aboard the California cars are no longer reliably working, conductors have more work explaining to passengers what train they are on... ALSO CONFUSED BY THE LEDs are all passengers trying to catch a Starlight, Zephyr, or San Joaquin, which have become completely disenfranchised in train information displays in Oakland, Emeryville, Richmond, Martinez, Davis, and Sacramento ... ANNOYING BONGING KLAXON NOISES and synthesized speech audio messages have destroyed the atmosphere of several of the staffed stations, making waits for late Capitol Corridor trains even more intolerable... WITH CAPITOL CORRIDOR TRAINS grabbing center stage with the lit signs it is very hard to find any posted departure times for other trains, and station agents seem even less motivated to let passengers know what is going on... MILLIONS SPENT, did we get any value? Unlike BART, Caltrain, and Metrolink electronic signs, the Capitol batch use older, harder to read sign technology and still cannot be trusted to give accurate information... A YEAR AFTER THE SIGNS FIRST showed up, questions persist about when or whether the system's various flaws will be addressed. With the electronic information so unreliable, it's hard to see the value in the system...

for buses called the San Fernando Valley Metro Rapidway.

Just a few years ago, after MTA Board members were invited to tour the busway system in Curitiba, Brazil, the MTA printed up literature promoting not only the Burbank Branch but the Exposition line as busways. The efforts of the grass-roots Friends4expo persuaded the MTA Board to opt for light rail on Exposition. In the Valley, however, two separate pieces of coercive legislation made the busway into the only option.

Originally planned as "Segment 4" of the Red Line, 20 years of studies postponed rail on the Burbank Branch. A NIMBY movement got a state law passed mandating that any rail on the line had to be subway. Then a Los Angeles County initiative passed forbidding local funds for subway construction. Trapped between state law and the County initiative, the rail option was dead.

The Valley Rapidway is destined to stay a contentious issue in the unfortunate bus vs. rail debate. With an ample 100-foot-wide right-of-way, the 13-mile route primarily runs through low density neighborhoods. Ridership is projected to be considerably less than Pasadena and half of Exposition. It does offer large park and ride facilities and will serve as a feeder to the Red Line.

Although the Valley busway project has no Federal funding commitment, federal transit bureaucrats are currently tilting toward bus projects. The Federal Transit Agency (FTA) has become a virtual Ministry of Propaganda for Bus Rapid Transit (BRT). This year the FTA is backing changes in its criteria for the New Starts program to make it considerably more difficult for many rail projects to qualify for funding.

Two years ago a group of pro-highway, anti-transit congressmen led by Majority Whip Tom DeLay (R-Texas) sponsored the famously inaccurate "BRT Shows Promise"

report by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO). The report carefully avoids mention of any negative BRT history in the U.S.

Busway follies such as the West Busway in Pittsburgh (\$55 Million per mile construction, estimated 50,000 daily riders, actual 6,000) or L.A.'s own Harbor Transitway (projected 63,000 daily riders, actual 3,000) cannot be found in the report. Apparently, these realities conflicted with the distorted picture DeLay wanted to present.

The mantra in the GAO report is that rubber-tired BRT can do everything that rail can do at a fraction of the cost. But by the FTA's own numbers, BRT simply doesn't deliver the ridership and the claim of lower capital costs is wildly exaggerated.

Using the FTA's own modeling, BRT on the average has attracted only one third of its estimated ridership while light rail yielded 122%. The myth that most light rail projects have huge cost overruns was exploded by an earlier 1999 GAO report that examined 14 New Starts projects. It found that every single one of the light rail projects was built on budget, but there were major cost overruns on the two BRT projects!

Bait-and-switch busway proposals from anti-rail road warriors are just hard to accept as serious answers to California's mobility problems. A further carrot is often dangled before skeptics that busways can be the first stage of a transition to rail. Los Angeles rail activists heard this repeatedly in the 1970's about the El Monte Busway before it was built over former Pacific Electric tracks in the median of the San Bernardino Freeway.

Once consent was given to pull out the tracks, Caltrans built the busway in a way that killed any future rail option. Thirty years later it has been converted to a car pool lane with marginal benefit to transit and no possible future rail use. The Valley Transitway looks like yet another wasteful boondoggle.

Diridon Knocked Down a Notch

Rod Diridon, locally known in Santa Clara County as the father of the troubled VTA light rail line, has been removed from the chairmanship of California's High Speed Rail Authority (CHSRA) after a controversial two-year tenure marked by campaign finance scandal, and apparent conflicts of interest involving CHSRA vendor contributions to the Diridon-run Mineta Transportation Institute.

In June, Diridon's colleagues voted him out of the post, which is subject to annual election by authority board members. Diridon had pleaded for a third term, but other board members expressed the view that it was time to have a new face leading the organization.

The new Authority Chairman is Joseph Petrillo, a recently appointed San Francisco land-use attorney whose long experience on the Coastal Commission has given him considerable depth on the environmental issues now facing the high speed rail project.

Petrillo has maintained good relations with Gov. Davis and legislators and is seen by most observers as an collaborative, low-key leader who can successfully build a political consensus for the project. "He really listens and says he wants the environmental work done properly," said TRAC Executive Director Alan C. Miller. "We are cautiously optimistic about his approach, although we have yet to see a new direction at the Rail Authority."

Diridon's relations with the Governor since the media spectacle last September 20, 2002 at his fundraiser, have been guarded at best. Memories of Republican Gubernatorial Candidate Bill Simon, surrounded by television news cameras on Diridon's front lawn,

attacking the governor for linking political pork to fundraising have dictated a distancing from Diridon, especially considering the current challenges involved in the recall election.

Diridon's monopolization of the agenda, public speaking opportunities and press contacts of the authority apparently antagonized other board members, who did not want to remain in his shadow. Another issue in the demotion was Diridon's inflexible opposition to study of the Altamont alignment, the preferred route of the original study and a popular choice which the Authority has never presented a credible reason for dropping.

This eventually spurred a revolt by San Francisco, East Bay, and Central Valley interests, who viewed Diridon's "sanjose-centric" focus as a detriment to the rest of the region. Even supporters of the Pacheco alignment eventually have understood that Diridon's stubborn refusal to hear of studying Altamont would send the project to court rather than construction.

"When you have legislators as respected and influential as Jackie Speer, Don Perata, and Darryl Steinberg all saying Altamont should be studied, refusing to do so is like ignoring the laws of gravity," said TRAC Board Member Dan McNamara. "Chances are you are going to end up on your butt."

Diridon is licking his wounds, but still on the authority board. The San Jose *Mercury News*, under a slightly catty lead mentioning that the king of rail was king no more, stated that "after [Diridon] lost the chairmanship, he had business cards printed listing his title as 'chairman emeritus' of the authority."