Subsidies Can’t Save the SUV

Do Californians love big cars and SUVs so much that they would pay any price to keep driving them? Maybe not. According to California car dealers, price matters a lot. Two years of major oil price increases seem to have put some surprising changes into motion. The hottest-selling cut today is the fuel-saving Toyota Prius hybrid. Central city residential property has become a hot commodity, and California rail ridership has hit all-time record highs.

Meanwhile SUVs were selling so poorly because of $50 refills that General Motors debt bonds were downgraded to junk. GM’s response was a huge fire sale of SUVs, first to employees and retirees, now to nearly anyone. This has caused short-term gains, but is unsustainable. With this subsidy, GM is closely mimicking the short-sighted economics used by highway builders.

State and federal taxes at the gas pump annually fail about $35 billion short of covering the basic costs of highway construction and maintenance. Decades ago, highway lobbyists might have been able to honestly claim that “user fees” paid all the costs. These days, the 44 cents a gallon US average doesn’t even keep the asphalt in good shape, and roads suck billions from the general fund. What level of gasoline tax would eliminate the subsidy of roads? Most experts familiar with transportation funding say it would take at least a $2 per gallon levy today to stop the red ink on roads.

The subsidy of oil fueled the mindless urbanization of vast areas of California, an arms race of aggressively large vehicles, and a dependence on foreign oil that even George W. Bush now admits is an addiction. In July, Bush said, “We’re hooked on oil from the Middle East, which is a national security problem and an economic security problem.”

Several times already, oil has broken through the $65 level, and Goldman Sachs predicts that $105 a barrel is a possibility in the next year, because of massive increases in third world consumption and long-term limits to refining capacity.

It is obviously time for a change in tax policies to encourage energy conservation, public transportation use, and alternative power, including electrification of rail. Past policies no longer make sense, now that we are at the end of the road on highway-based development.

Transportation Secretary Norm Mineta was in full-scale denial last month as he announced faintly tightened fuel economy rules for trucks. “This is a plan that will save gas and result in less pain at the pump,” said Mineta.

However, the new regulations ironically excluded some of the worst fuel offenders on the road, including the Hummer H2, Ford Excursion and Chevy Suburban. Mineta, staying defensive, told reporters the timing “was not related to the price of gas at all.”

As usual, the public has seen the light far sooner than politicians. Californians focus on what they pay at the pump, and they don’t like the prices. As gasoline prices have reached new peaks in the past decade, rail ridership has hit all-time record highs.

As usual, the public has seen the light far sooner than politicians. Californians focus on what they pay at the pump, and they don’t like the prices. As gasoline prices have reached new peaks in the past decade, rail ridership has hit all-time record highs. With $65 a barrel oil, state and federal subsidies just can’t keep gas prices in a comfort zone for motorists. Even absent reform of gas subsidies, it’s becoming obvious that trains are the future.
Join TRAC and Help Fight for Improved Trains

Clip & mail with your check or money order payable to:
Train Riders Association of California (TRAC)
1008 Tenth Street, #276 Sacramento, CA 95814 (916) 557-1667
Please fill out the following, or attach address label:

Regular member $35
Contributing member $60
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To help TRAC keep its staff at full-time, I am enclosing a special donation of $________.
Enclosed is a donation to TRAC's Legislative Action Fund in the amount of $________.
I want to support the Rail News. Enclosed is a donation to TRAC's Educational arm, the California Rail Foundation in the amount of $________.

By Gerald Cauthen

Mr. Wendell Cox dislikes passenger rail systems. He speaks constantly on this subject with a jaundiced Dyerian sense of self-confidence. But who are we to knock his manner? It has served him well. It gets attention.

Usually he doesn’t stray far from his main subject, which is to discredit all forms of passenger rail service except as applied to cities like New York that couldn’t function without it. His attacks are as predictably as they are meritoriously. Americans love their automobiles, proclaims Mr. Cox, “and besides, passenger rail isn’t cost-effective”.

Visit Mr. Cox’s website and you will find his lengthy “Curriculum Vitae” - cross-country runner, commissioner, councilman, visiting fellow, adjunct scholar, adjunct fellow, advisor to governments, etc. He uses this background effectively to aggravate his role as executor of rail and unabashed apostle for a society dominated by automobile forms of travel.

To Mr. Cox, few if any of America’s passenger rail services are of any use. Mr. Cox would have us believe that Americans love their automobiles too much to take trains and that’s perfectly fine to leave public rail systems to passenger rail systems.

Underlying his aggressive pronounce- ments is a sleavagery, but largely unstated premise: namely, that automotive forms of travel pay their own way.

How often have we been told that no general funds are used to pay for automobile and truck travel because the roads are built and maintained with gasoline taxes collected at the pump? This premise is false. Yet Mr. Cox’s constant attacks on trains invariably rely upon specious compar- isons between the allegedly high costs of passenger rail service and the “pay as you go” costs of driving.

The truth of the matter is that automobile and truck travelers don’t come even close to paying the full public costs of their driving. On the contrary American roadway users are the single most lavishly subsi- dized large group of people in the world. If you doubt this, read on.

According to the American Petroleum Institute, in 2000 gasoline taxes in our country averaged 44 cents a gallon, com- pared to $3 to $4 a gallon in Europe and Japan.

How big a difference today? The answer is not hard to find. Our gasoline taxes are uniquely and unreasonably low because they don’t begin to cover the total public costs of driving. In fact the amounts col- lected in this country are so low that they are more than eaten up by the cost of build- ing and maintaining roadways.

Lionel Gambill
ARGUMENT FOR THE CHANGE
by Gerald Cauthen
Each year the TRAC members attending the annual TRAC Conference elect 13 Board members. There is no contemplation that this process will change. Any other change cannot be brought about by the membership itself made in public. TRAC’s success in educating and persuading California decision-makers on key rail issues depends upon Board Members who spend more time and effort on publications and lobbying efforts and less on divisive internal political issues. I urge a strong NO vote on the bylaw change proposal. The status quo allows you, the members, to choose TRAC’s leadership and direction.

ARGUMENT AGAINST THE CHANGE
by Richard Tolmach
The majority of the Board objected to using a closed meeting to disenfranchise the membership. The consensus was that if such a move be taken it would be a decision by the membership itself made in public. The 3 Board Members who proposed this change have failed to make a case for it. Their concern that the Board has more knowledge than members about whom is qualified to lead the organization is self-serving at best. Board Members, in my experience, are not more informed nor qualified to judge character than the TRAC general membership. Membership organizations thrive due to actions by their members. Encouraging members is not a good way to expand membership or encourage member participation. California non-profit corporations have learned that hard experience, that anti-democratic methods of officer selection can wasteful battles between boards and membership, or between boards and officers. My hope is that TRAC avoids this predictable problem.

The Times’ gas cost figures appear to be exaggerated. Actually, most Metrolink commuters from Santa Clarita to downtown Los Angeles would cost $7 to $8 in fuel. The same trip costs $12 on Metrolink, claimed the article. The status quo allows you, the member, to choose TRAC’s leadership and direction.
by Richard F. Tolmach

Barely five years after its inauguration, the
9.4-mile (15.2 km) light rail line in Montpellier, France carries over 130,000 passengers each weekday, 35,000 more than initial predictions. Traffic was so good that frequencies were increased to every 5 minutes just 14 months after service started.

Still faced with overcrowding, Montpellier then added two more trams and ordered modular sections and extra trucks from Alstom to extend each tram’s length from 100 to 125 feet. The fleet now numbers thirty big blue trams.

The Mediterranean city dates from 985 AD but most of the growth that has made it a regional city of 500,000 residents occurred since 1960. Creation of a new suburban campus for its ancient university (Europe’s first, by most accounts) produced strains on traffic facilities. Community leaders were eager to knit the city’s highly prized historic pedestrian areas together with newly created ones.

Montpellier’s minuscule line, opened in July 2005, runs almost entirely on surface, using tracks laid in pedestrianized streets or turf. There are no street overpasses on the line, but trams ramp down under a portion of the Place de la Comédie which often fills with people. Otherwise, the line is entirely at grade with about 4 level crossings per mile, primarily using traffic signals.

Until about 1985 in France, the conventional wisdom was that a new rail line in the midst of an already-developed city would snarl traffic and cause negative environmental impacts. Then a new light rail line in Grenoble showed that accompanying rail with street calming, center city pedestrianization of streets, and other city-improving amenities was extremely popular with residents. Montpellier made a conscious decision to emulate Grenoble’s successful techniques, adopting low-floor cars and giving light rail priority over traffic.

The starter line cost about $400 million at the time it was built, of which Montpellier put up about three-quarters. However, the city has capitalized on the line’s revitalization of its center, and more that recouped the expenditure from development that ensued. The city built a vast convention district around Place de la Comédie which often fills with people. Otherwise, the line is entirely at grade with about 4 level crossings per mile, primarily using traffic signals.

Montpellier’s exquisite setting and climate approximate a pre-smog and pre-sprawl Los Angeles. Arriving on a TGV averaging 120 mph on a four hour trip from Paris, it is striking how pedestrian-friendly the city has become since the tramway opened. From the Mediterranean city dates from 985 AD but most of the growth that has made it a regional city of 500,000 residents occurred since 1960. Creation of a new suburban campus for its ancient university (Europe’s first, by most accounts) produced strains on traffic facilities. Community leaders were eager to knit the city’s highly prized historic pedestrian areas together with newly created ones.

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Trams Attract So Many?

Why Do Montpellier's Trams Attract So Many?

TaM Route 1 is in blue, Route 2 is not on this map but you can tell where it will run from viewing the heavy bus traffic at 3 planned transfers: Corum, P. de Lumiere and Gares.

front door of the station, you can tell things are set up for the nonmotorized. The tram stop is fifty meters straight ahead, rental bicycles are available from the TaM main ticket office adjacent to the stop, and the pedestrianized tram street is quiet and visually appealing.

The quiet, fast-loading low-floor trams are one of the best features of the system. The interior design of the cars is outstanding, with compact but comfortable seating that does not impinge upon thoughtful accommodations for leaning and standing passengers. The cars are comfortable and offer good visibility for riders even at 100 percent loads.

The daring blue livery emblazoned with white swallows is not just good marketing for TaM, because the tramway acts as an effective advertisement for the new vitality and individuality of the community it exemplifies.

Montpellier has a vibrant city center, now that traffic on its narrow streets has been quelled. The vast Place de la Comédie sporadically becomes a street market with vegetables, fruit, cheeses and olive, and is the setting for musical performances and seasonal festivals. It fronts onto one of the most beautiful medieval cities in southern France, on hills to the west.

All along the most traffic-impacted parts of the route, landscaping, fountains, and art make the line an improvement to the neighborhood, increasing the amenities for pedestrians and making a walking trip to the tram stop more appealing. North of the center city, on the way to the University, the tramway is paralleled more than half its distance by a bikeway which benefits from the protection from traffic.

Even though the metropolitan rate of auto ownership is in the same range as that of San Francisco or even Santa Mónica, there has been a tremendous shift in travel mode towards the tram. TaM projects that once the third line is built, average daily ridership on its network will exceed city population.

But, Why So Many Riders?

How does a 10-mile tramway in a 500,000-person city carry nearly the passengers of Los Angeles’ $1.8 billion Metro Red Line Subway? Even more so, how does it blow away systems in Baltimore, Miami, or San Jose that are many times its length or cost?

There certainly are many other factors, but it is difficult to deny the importance of the following ones in Montpellier:

- Route and engineering design quality
- Attractive design and marketing
- Integrated scheduling with buses
- Low floors, level loading
- Direct connection to national service
- Low costs and high efficiencies
- Annuity investment strategy
- Multiagency cooperation
- Service flexibility

However, the most compelling reason for Montpellier’s triumph appears to be creation of a company jointly owned by local government and a competent, stable private firm with a fiscal stake in the continuing success of service.

Many Exceptional Features for California Systems to Emulate

TaM responded to success by upping service to every five minutes 7 am to 7:30 pm, barely two years from the start of tram service.

Center city routing is circuitous to provide access to the top 3 destinations: Place de la Comédie, intercity stations, and Polygone.

Transfers to bus feeders at hubs are key to the success of the TaM network. This one is Corum, transfer point to soon-to-open line 2.

Sources: TaM
On April 17, 1973, I handed in my final exam for my BSME at Pitt, got on a plane the next morning from Pittsburgh to San Francisco Area, and was on the SP payroll the next day. It was a dream job made possible by my junior year internship at the West Colton Yard construction project, where I was a junior rodman for the amazing Godfrey Lyon, as a result of a phone call I placed directly to Harry Williamson, SP’s Chief Engineer. I reported to work at the Mechanical Department, got a grey metal desk in a bullpen, surrounded by cheap yellow-paint walls, and I was in heaven, with the exception of the unofficial “no-pretty-women-on-the-payroll” rule. (D.J. Russell thought that would be distracting to us guys.)

Bill Thompson was my boss, and William Thompson was his boss. Bill Thompson was the Chair of the prestigious AAR Car Construction Committee, and everybody else in the One Market Street 3rd floor cubicles (Mechanical Department Managers) were on every other AAR committee you could think of. AAR, Coupe & Draft Gear, Open Top Loading, you name it. My boss (Wally) very reluctantly agreed to be on the important Tank Car committee, only if SP agreed to give the Department the materials he thought Mr. Biaggini had to sign off on that one.

At Pitt, I had years of access to the Westinghouse mainframe computer systems, so I came to SP as a fully loaded engineering computer geek. Bill and Wally assigned me to perform feasibility and engineering calculations to support the AAR committee activities, where proposed new freight car design requirements would be vetted and approved before they were allowed into interchange service.

Bill was a class guy and a real railroad man. He had been working at WP, Rocky young up-starts, which is what I was. Somewhere in 1973, Bill got a submittal from American Car and Foundry (ACF) for a freight car design that was a real head-scratcher. Seems that ACF wanted to take fiberglass ICBM fuel tanks, attach a steel structure at each end, and build a freight car. The freight car design was fine, but that vertical bouncing caused by poorly maintained freight car suspensions (vertical bounce and hump yard operations). Instead of controlling the operating environment, where incredible savings in weight and fuel can be realized, it is easier to beef up the equipment to accommodate a violent environment. As far as the FRA is concerned, the passenger car design requirements simply adopted some of the AAR numbers (designed for 5,000 pound buff force axial load requirement) without consideration of the history and background of the engineering criteria.

As a member of the APTA Shared Use Right-of-Way Working Group, I shared these insights recently with FTA and FRA representatives. The entire passenger rail industry knows that FRA regulations are still driving cost into the railcar and into the public purse. Instead, we need to get our operating environment under control, which means reducing the weight of the car and upgrading the suspension system.

On Tuesday, I reported to work at the Mechanical Department, headed by Ed Lind after his return from running the joint FRA-AAR-RPI Team, headed up by Ed Lind after his appointment to the SP Track-Train Dynamics. One Market 3rd floor. and Mr. Leriche was a frequent visitor to Thomford’s position at SP before he retired, the criteria was Cedric Leriche, who held Bill Thompson’s position for a while. Cedric was actually an engineering manager, and he didn’t warm up to cocky young up-starts, which is what I was. Somewhere in 1973, Bill got a submittal from American Car and Foundry (ACF) for a freight car design that was a real head-scratcher. Seems that ACF wanted to take fiberglass ICBM fuel tanks, attach a steel structure at each end, and build a freight car. The freight car design was fine, but that vertical bouncing caused by poorly maintained freight car suspensions (vertical bounce and hump yard operations). Instead of controlling the operating environment, where incredible savings in weight and fuel can be realized, it is easier to beef up the equipment to accommodate a violent environment. As far as the FRA is concerned, the passenger car design requirements simply adopted some of the AAR numbers (designed for 5,000 pound buff force axial load requirement) without consideration of the history and background of the engineering criteria.

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The proposed Union City Intermodal Passenger Station Rail Project released its Environmental Impact Report in April spelling out its goals, objectives and description. According to the EIR, “the goal of the proposed project is to increase public transit patronage by creating a facility that provides for the safe, convenient, and efficient transfer of transit patrons between various transportation modes.” The concept is fairly simple. It takes the Caltrain Capital Corridor, which is the Capital Corridor – the train that runs off the Union Pacific (ex-SP) Niles Subdivision and places them near lesser populated neighborhoods along the Niles Subdivision. The curved connection at Shinn will add wheel squeal and vibration to the adjacent neighborhood. However, this can be mitigated by a sound wall, curve greasers, non jointed rail, spring rail frogs, and ballast mats or shredded tire underlay. The City of Fremont, which borders Union City to the south, is objecting to the plan, calling it “ludicrous, crazy and obscene.” Fremont objects to any layover facility being built in Fremont and questions whether the sound mitigation for the connection at Shinn will be effective.

Fremont is taking the “NIMBY” stance and says this project doesn’t fit into its General Plan. Gene Skoropowski, Executive Director of the Capitol Corridor, says they have been working closely with Union City and thinks that this project will enhance the corridor operation and, after the station is operational, the viability of the Hayward station stop would be re-evaluated. He said that the Union Pacific is also in favor of the project because it will allow better separation of freight and passenger operations and less impedance on the Altamont Corridor.

The Federal Transit Administration is the federal agency responsible for ensuring that federal money allocated to public transit projects is well spent. In its Mission Statement the agency under “Excellence” characterizes the FTA as committed to “…being the best and delivering the highest value for American investment.” Under “Leadership” FTA promises to “…lead and deliver the highest value and adding value are what cost-effectiveness is all about. If a public project is not cost-effective it’s generally not worth building. One of the ways that the FTA tries to ensure that federal transit dollars are spent wisely in accordance with the goals it has established for itself is to set up appropriate cost-effectiveness and other performance criteria in advance. The Federal Transit Administration is an embryonic boondoggle that can only survive by evading federal rules. In the latest maneuver, Rep. Mike Honda, D-Campbell, slipped language into the FY 2005/2006 Federal Transit Improvement proposals. The proposed BART extension doesn’t even come close to making the grade, but, according to an editorial in the Palo Alto Daily News, the BART proposal came in dead last out of 27 national candidates. Because of its poor cost-effectiveness rating and also because of the adverse effect on VTA operations that would be imposed by a very costly new BART line, FTA gave the BART-to-San Jose proposal a “NOT RECOMMENDED” rating.

The reasons for the project’s rock-bottom cost-effectiveness are not hard to fathom. BART-to-San Jose would extend BART 16.3 miles on a hooked path from Fremont via San Jose Diridon Station to BART 16.3 miles on a hooked path from Fremont via San Jose Diridon Station to Fremont. Because of the indirect route and low zoning densities along the route including sprawled out hi tech “campuses” in Silicon Valley, each surrounded by acres of free parking and served by fast arterials and freeways, it is virtually impossible to effectively serve the area by rail. Patronage calculations show conclusively that the anticipated patronage is far too low to justify the huge cost of the project. Under such circumstances, common sense dictates that the proposal be dropped from consideration.

Or so one would think. However, apparently not in San Jose. Enter the politicians. In San Jose there is a cabal of local boosters who think they should have whatever they want regardless of fairness and prudence. This group is dominated by the Silicon Valley Leadership Group (SVLG). The SVLG proclaims that BART-to-San Jose would be just the ticket to solve San Jose’s transportation and traffic congestion problems. The fact that this contention is totally without merit as indicated in successive patronage analyses and cost estimates is apparently of no consequence to the SVMG and its supporters. To this group it’s the “prestige” of having a BART line that counts, not its ultimate usefulness and certainly not its cost.

Given the worthy goals expressed in the FTA Mission Statement it is reasonable to assume that FTA, if left to its own devices, would try to ensure that only cost-effective projects were approved for federal funding. In other words there is little if any chance that BART could qualify for federal funding through any legitimate federal evaluation process. The “BART or bust” cabal apparently prevailed upon Congressman Honda to insert language into TEA-LU with this in mind. The language is designed to subvert the federal evaluation process so as to allow the BART proposal and three other favored projects were approved for federal funding. In other words there is little if any chance that BART could qualify for federal funding through any legitimate federal evaluation process.

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FEATURED SPEAKERS

Linda Culp, SANDAG Representative on LOSSAN Corridor
30 YEARS OF GROWTH ON CALIFORNIA’S MAINLINE
Linda will expand and update her presentation to our board in San Diego, speaking about the entire southern coastal rail corridor including: Surfliners, Coasters, Metrolink, interaction with freight service and future corridor plans.

Gerald Francis, GM of Rail Operations, LAC–MTA
CALIFORNIA’S BIGGEST FLEET GROWS SOME MORE
Gerald will speak to us about the new light-rail cars capable of operating on all three LA light rail lines and what it took to create these cars; he will update us on the signaling upgrades on the Gold Line; and of course he’ll fill us in about planned upgrades and expansions in rail service throughout LA County.

Pat Montague, Board of Directors, NARP Region 12
BUILDING A DYNAMIC RAIL PASSENGER MOVEMENT
Pat will give us an overview of the year's contentious fight over Amtrak funding and how it raised awareness of the importance of a national rail passenger network; he will then update us on the current status of this year’s progress; he will also speak on the importance of the relationships between NARP and its state affiliate organizations, and specifically with TRAC.

Wayne S. Williams, Principal, W. S. Williams & Associates, Rail Transportation Consultants
DESIGNING MODERN RAIL FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM
Wayne will illustrate and expand upon his article on how America came to be saddled with the current FRA regulations (see page 7) and show us some examples of the modern rail technologies including DMUs and integrated modular sets possible outside current, artificial FRA constraints.

PUBLIC PANEL

HON. HANNAH-BETH JACKSON, FORMER STATE ASSEMBLY MEMBER
LINDA CULP, SANDAG REPRESENTATIVE ON LOSSAN CORRIDOR (SEE ABOVE)
LEA SIMPSON, CAPITAL PROJECTS NORTH, CALTRANS DIVISION OF RAIL
METROLINK REPRESENTATIVE (INVITED)
MOTRLEINK REPRESENTATIVE (INVITED)

This panel will examine California's regional needs for more intercity and commuter rail service and various ways rail operators can squeeze more capacity out of tracks and existing sets of rail equipment.

Hannah-Beth is active in COAST, a Santa Barbara-based group advocating commuter rail alternatives to Route 101 widening. Linda has led the planned expansion of track capacity in San Diego County for SANDAG. Lea is Caltrans’ new capital projects manager for the San Joaquin. Richard was author of the piece in July’s Rail News advocating a set of hourly headway services for Southern California.

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

GIL CARMICHAEL
Senior Chairman, Intermodal Transportation Institute, University of Denver:
THE CASE FOR INTERSTATE II: INTERSTATES OF STEEL
Gil Carmichael was head of the Federal Railway Administration (1989-1993) under Bush I; he was also chair of the Amtrak Reform Council. As recently as 1987 he promoted a 1000-mile highway expansion in his native Mississippi. In 2005, he is promoting Interstate II, a federal investment in America’s rail infrastructure equivalent to the 1950’s mandate that built the asphalt system. He came to believe in rail as our transportation future because, he says, “…there are no alternatives . . . conventional solutions built around individual modes simply cannot cope with the growth . . .” Mr. Carmichael makes the case for putting the needed investment into a national system of newly modern rail routes capable of handling 21st Century transportation needs—both freight and passenger. He compares the opportunity with the massive constraints facing highway and airport expansion.

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