

IMPROVING
PUBLIC TRANSIT EFFECTIVENESS
IN THE
URBAN AREA OF THE 1980'S

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By: Wendell Cox, Member
Los Angeles County Transportation Commission

It is both a time of crisis and a time of challenge for the nation's public transit industry. It is a time of crisis because, even as the real value of subsidies is declining due to increased operating costs, a reduction in public assistance is proposed. It is a time of challenge, with overloadings so serious that waiting passengers are often passed at stops by transit vehicles which do not even have standing room remaining. Moreover, the rising costs of automobile commuting continually increase transit's market potential. Transit's success, or lack of it, in facing the future will have a very material effect upon the future development of our urban areas.

TRANSIT PRODUCTIVITY

As strategic options are considered, it is essential that public transit seek the objective of improved productivity. Public expenditures and transit resources can be most effectively utilized if patronage is maximized. This requires that no more public funding than is absolutely necessary be expended upon any particular transit service, minimizing waste and maximizing service opportunities. In these financially constrained times, the most reliable indicator of transit productivity is the number of passengers carried per dollar of subsidy.

IMPROVING TRANSIT PRODUCTIVITY

Significantly improving transit productivity must necessarily entail a broadening of transit's perspective. Transit is not an end to be served in itself; on the contrary transit serves the objective of moving large numbers of people at comparatively low economic and social costs. Overloadings and the minimal subsidies per passenger on most high demand services attest to transit's special ability to efficiently move people.

Yet many transit services are significantly under-utilized and require high subsidies per passenger. Others, most notably commuter express services, are well patronized but require high subsidies, even when premium fares are charged. These disproportionately high subsidy levels impede the ability of transit to maximize patronage, and unnecessarily so.

Where transit services require unduly high subsidies, and where less subsidy intensive alternatives are available (such as car-pooling, van-pooling, paratransit or private bus operators), they should be promoted. Commuting by private express bus contributes to public urban policy objectives just as surely as does commuting by public transit express bus. The effective utilization of both public funds and transit resources requires that, to the maximum extent feasible, service be concentrated where subsidies are low and demand is high.

As alternatives requiring lower subsidies replace transit service (where transit cannot as effectively serve), public resources will be freed for use where transit is distinctively competent, the high demand and low subsidy services, which are so often overloaded. In comparison with their former use, these subsidies would be much more effectively utilized, creating an "accelerator" effect, greatly increasing fare revenues and, paradoxically resulting in net increases in both transit service levels and transit employment.

The transit industry can improve its productivity by maximizing patronage per subsidy dollar, serving those markets which it serves best, while seeking less subsidy intensive alternatives in other markets. A transit industry which improves productivity in the face of today's challenges will very effectively demonstrate the wisdom of public investment in its services. More importantly, such a transit industry will most effectively contribute to improved urban mobility.