

Monday, October 31, 2005

Metrolink runs on honesty

Q. Recently, I rode the Metrolink from Los Angeles to San Juan Capistrano. Bought a ticket at the vending machine. On the way home, I became aware that there was no conductor aboard collecting the tickets.

How does Metrolink know who's paying and who's not? As a taxpayer, I want to know how are we paying for this service? It seems to me something is very wrong.

- Larry Kalish, Dana Point

A. Larry, the answer might not thrill you, but here it is: Passengers are on the honor system.

Metrolink spokeswoman Denise Tyrrell said the trains do have conductors, but the reason they don't ask for tickets is so people can board and hop off of the trains quickly, easily.

Sheriff's deputies patrol the trains at times asking to see tickets. Not having one can get the fare evader a fine of up to \$200.

When cops ask passengers to prove they bought a ticket, fewer than 1 percent fail to produce one, according to Metrolink statistics.

The six-county Metrolink railway costs \$121 million a year to run. On an average weekday, 40,000-plus use it.

Fares cover 43.2 percent of the operating expense - a very high rate compared with other mass-transit systems. When you kick in other revenues, such as what Metrolink charges freight trains to run on its tracks, local governments end up subsidizing 45 percent of the operating costs.

Q. I've read about the widening of the San Diego (I-405) Freeway from Seal Beach to Costa Mesa.

The latest plan is a more "streamlined" idea that would take fewer homeowners' properties.

I don't understand how any of these plans could be considered when the traffic flow would increase by only 5 mph. How does the Orange County Transportation Authority justify spending all that money, disrupting people's lives, and slowing traffic for years during construction to only speed up a commute by 5 mph?

Am I missing something?

- Cliff Calamonaci, Costa Mesa

A. Well, you didn't add in the cost - \$500 million.

The OCTA was pushed hard by City Council members and residents of Westminster, who said that a wider widening would have ripped apart their town, taking too many homes and businesses.

The winning plan would add two lanes in each direction and take, at most, 11 homes.

Lou Correa, a county supervisor whose district includes Westminster, sits on the OCTA board and voted for the winning hand.

He said it balances the quality of life of the commuter and the town.

There were 13 alternatives considered. One of the last to be rejected would have cost \$1.5 billion and also created public-bus lanes; it would have improved rush-hour traffic by just 6 mph.

"It is expensive for 5 miles per hour," Correa says, but he believes it is the "best bang for your buck."

Cliff, if you still think the project stinks, take comfort in that there is no money for it.

Much of the funds would come from an extension of the Measure M half-cent sales tax, which voters must approve.

The issue won't hit the ballot for a year, at least.

Fact of the week: O.C. residents aren't keen on a 12-mile tunnel highway, with four lanes and likely a toll, to Riverside County beneath the Cleveland National Forest.

(The OCTA is considering several tunnel versions, as well as other ways to add lanes between the counties.)

In an OCTA-commissioned telephone survey this month, with a 4 percent margin of error, only 23 percent of registered voters said the tunnel is a "high priority."

Meanwhile, 25 percent gave it a "medium priority" and 46 percent gave it a "low priority."

At that point in the survey, the respondents had not been told the estimated price tag: \$5 billion to \$5.5 billion.

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