



Tuesday, April 14, 2002

Mr. Donald Bliss, Attorney at Law
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Dear Mr. Bliss:

I am here representing grass roots citizens transit groups of Southern California. I would like to share a few concerns with you and offer some solutions that would help ease overcrowding on buses and still allow the MTA to carry out its other responsibilities (rail construction and transportation planning).

PROBLEMS OF THE CONSENT DECREE

When the MTA entered the consent decree in 1996, it agreed to add buses, create new services, and reduce overcrowding per the terms of the document. MTA has bought thousands of new buses from Neoplan, New Flyer and North American Bus Industries to replace older equipment and expand service. MTA has also added consent decree pilot project lines that have varying degrees of success. However, overcrowding is still a major problem on MTA services.

Overcrowding is not the result of negligence or malice to bus riders. Treating it as such leads to expensive bus purchases and high operational costs that do nothing to remedy the problem. Overcrowding results primarily from poor management, not lack of buses.

POOR MANAGEMENT=OVERCROWDING

Forced to cut costs to comply with the consent decree, the MTA has cut the number of transit operations supervisors (TOSs) in half. Remaining TOSs handle twice the responsibilities, making effective oversight of the bus system impossible.

There are other administrative problems. Ride checks have fallen behind. MTA uses ridership figures that are a few years old because ride and schedule checking jobs have

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also been cut. This doesn't give MTA a fully accurate picture of ridership patterns and schedule compliance.

Without accurate ridership and schedule data, the already overburdened TOSs cannot redeploy buses to ease congestion on lines or keep schedules due to detours or similar operational challenges.

Quality control is very important, yet the enforcers (TOSs, checkers and dispatchers) have seen their ranks dwindle, mainly because these jobs weren't visible to the public.

The loss of the TOSs, checkers and dispatchers is a current result of the consent decree and has done much to worsen overcrowding.

LACK OF CAPACITY=OVERCROWDING

Only New York City's MTA carries more riders than the Los Angeles MTA. With so much demand for transit service, overcrowding is inevitable on any major transit system. As anyone who has traveled on the transit systems of other city's knows, there are always numerous standees.

New York City and San Francisco have fewer seats (each forward-facing row has 2 seats on one side and 1 seat on the other) to accommodate more riders. In Los Angeles, the consent decree legally restricts the number of standees, which shrinks the carrying capacity of a bus and forces the agency to a standard that no transit system can meet.

Forcing MTA into buying more buses to relieve overcrowding may seem like the obvious remedy, but this does not help reduce overcrowding. Instead, it forces MTA to make cuts from other services to pay for a solution that will not work.

MTA's buses cannot handle the volume of riders. Therefore, capacity needs to be increased. But adding more buses alone is not the solution to overcrowding.

Overcrowding is the result of many outside factors, such as:

- **Traffic congestion.** Buses have to share the roads with other vehicles. Bus drivers also have to leave traffic to serve bus stops and fight to get the 40-foot vehicles back in traffic. This slows down service and hurts on-time performance, which in turn leads to overcrowding.
- **Leapfrogging.** This is a phenomenon seen on the busiest of MTA's lines, especially when frequencies are 8 minutes or better. Buses do not stay in order. Drivers overtake each other. If a driver sees that a bus is serving a stop, he or she will drive on without picking up the loads. This results in one bus being crowded while the bus that made the leap has fewer passengers. The crowded bus is further

slowed down because of the additional loads, allowing it to be overtaken by even more buses. Creating a “no-leapfrog” rule would not work since it would be unenforceable and at times, impractical. Drivers sometimes have to leapfrog to stay on schedule, but there are cases where drivers will intentionally pass up a stop so that they don’t have to deal with the crowding.

- **Mechanical failure.** Buses are complex machines and are prone to breakdown. Often, the buses can’t move because of a minor malfunction, such as a jammed farebox or doors that do not close properly. If a bus has to be taken out of service, passengers must take the buses behind them. If the bus can move once the problem has been fixed, it has been thrown off schedule and the buses are crowded. Mechanical failure is not necessarily the result of lax maintenance.

Congestion, leapfrogging, and breakdowns all affect the ability to keep a schedule. These are also factors that MTA cannot control. Traffic congestion management is left to cities, not MTA. For MTA to control congestion solely to ease overcrowding, it would have to usurp the authority of the many transportation departments in Los Angeles County. The consent decree does not give MTA those powers.

Forcing the MTA to buy more buses does little to alleviate overcrowding. The lines that the consent decree focuses on already have the highest service levels in the MTA’s service area, and provide some of the most frequent services in the country. The lines run at 12-minute or better frequencies during *off-peak* times. Many local lines have complementing limited-stop service and run around the clock. The riders are not undeserved because of race, income or other socioeconomic factors.

Adding more buses to these routes would only help symbolically. Taking into account the above factors that hinder performance, adding service to busy lines does not mean that riders redistribute themselves. Doubling bus service from 4 minutes to 2 minutes during peak hours on a crowded line would not mean that every rider would have a seat. That might happen if the buses were on schedule all the time. What will actually happen, as it does now, is that there will be buses that will be completely full and others that only have a few riders on them. The loads would still be uneven, and no consent decree, no matter how well written or stringent, can change this.

A more responsible solution is to reduce overcrowding by adding capacity rather than adding supply. How? We have a few suggestions.

REDUCING OVERCROWDING AND ADDING CAPACITY

MTA will obviously have to buy more buses. Forcing the agency to buy more buses because the consent decree target goals aren’t met leads to expensive additions to service that won’t get the job done. This leads to a cycle of MTA failing to comply with the target load factors, and it’ll be forced to buy even more buses. The added buses still

won't reduce load factors, and the cycle repeats itself. This leads to wasteful spending on buses and adds to operating costs, while doing little or nothing to improve service. This will create a fiscal nightmare for MTA in the long run, and could lead to a systemic collapse of the agency.

Here are some ways MTA could provide service to better comply with the consent decree, still be fiscally responsible, and be able to handle present and future ridership.

- **Articulated buses (artics).** The 60-foot buses are practically a necessity because of ridership. Depending on seating configuration and number of doors (2 or 3), articulated buses can carry up to 50% more riders than a 40-foot bus. Reducing service by ratios of 1:2 (60 seats vs. 80 seats), 2:3 (120 vs. 120) or 3:4 (180 vs. 160) (artics to 40' buses) results in minor cost savings. In light of current ridership conditions, this would not be a wise move. A 1:1 (60 seats vs. 40 seats), substitution results in higher costs, but provides savings when compared to increasing bus service to reduce overcrowding.

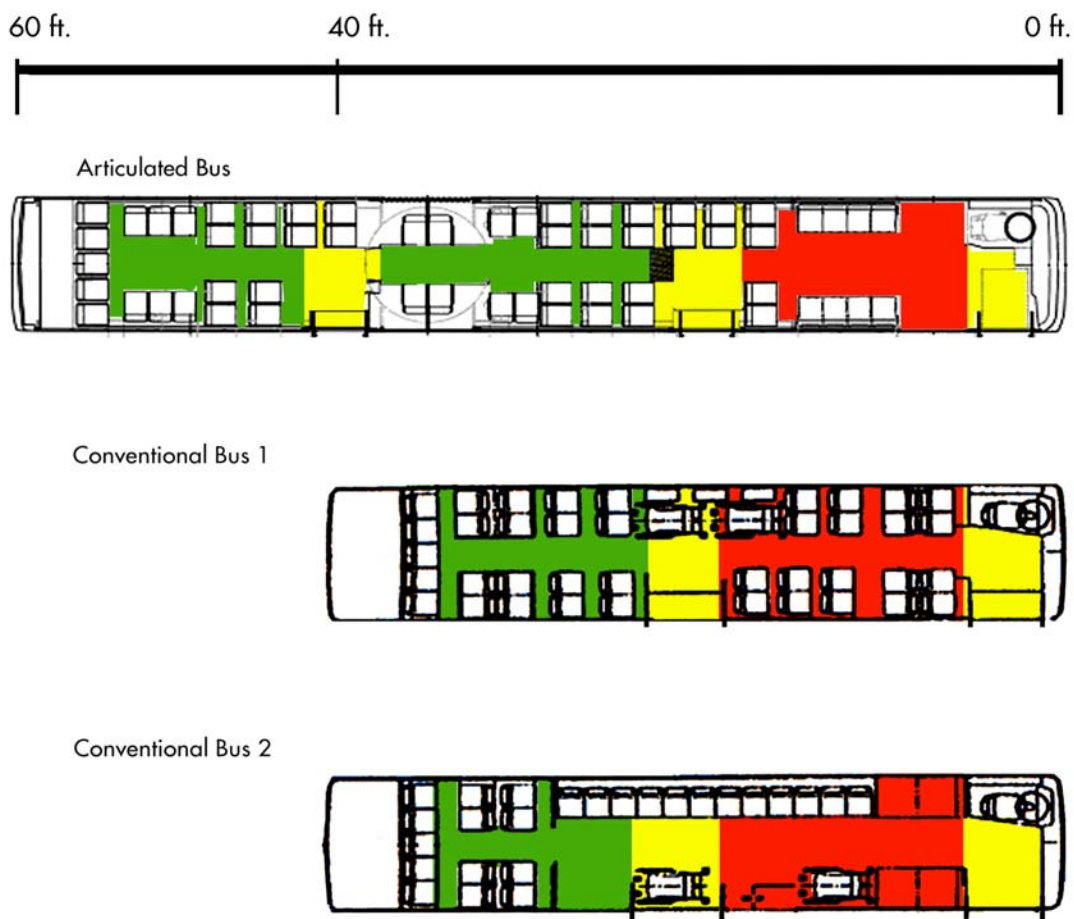
There are some concerns with purchasing articulated buses, mainly because of MTA mandates. While low-floor articulated buses are available, they don't comply with the MTA mandate to use low-emission fuels, such as natural gas. The South Coast Air Quality Management District exempts artics from the no diesel rule. Modern diesel engines are nearly as clean as natural gas, however, since diesel engines conjure up images of black soot, the MTA may encounter political resistance to their purchase. As for alternative-fueled artics, electric trolleybuses are available, but MTA does not use ETBs, which would require power lines to be strung, and ETBs are expensive to produce since few agencies buy them. A natural gas artic is being developed for the American market, but they are expensive and may be mechanically unreliable because they are first generation units. Nonetheless, artics remain the best hope for reducing overcrowding.

- **Smaller buses.** Bigger is better. So is smaller. MTA has several bus routes with massive overcrowding, but also has routes that are lightly used. These routes can use shorter 35-foot or 30-foot midibuses. Many buses MTA already uses can be built in shorter varieties. By using smaller buses on lighter routes (such as in the suburbs or at night), MTA saves on fuel costs and can free up 40-foot buses to expand service on routes that need them. Also, some small buses can run on zero-emission battery power, adding to environmental benefits.
- **Limited-stop service.** Since service has to be added, busy routes can use limited-stop/Rapid buses.
- **Expand Rail.** The *ultimate* bus, in terms of capacity, comfort, and speed, is not a bus at all, but a train. On lines where overcrowding is excessive, the best solution may be to rehabilitate existing rail rights-of-way (when available) to handle

passenger service and relieve some of the pressure on the bus lines. Trains are not slowed by traffic, do not “leapfrog” and can be timed perfectly to arrive at even intervals. In addition, they are far cheaper to operate, since a single train can handle nearly 1,000 passengers, depending on its length. The only way to improve transit in the long run is to improve and expand *both* the bus and the rail systems. The consent decree, if strictly interpreted, may prevent this.

Reducing overcrowding and providing more service are, without question, noble goals. However, throwing more buses at the problem will not accomplish this and, by sucking all the funding from transit improvement projects, it may actually make overcrowding worse. We hope that you will order the MTA to continue to strive towards a reduction in overcrowding, while not mandating it to purchase more buses unless, after careful analysis, they are confident it will serve the interests of its riders.

Example: Bus Interiors can be color coded, so riders know where to sit or stand. The operator can direct riders to stand or sit in the Green Section and tell riders that the Red Section is only for the Elderly and Wheelchairs. The operator can direct passengers to exit only via the Green Section, as the Red Section is for passengers boarding.



Bus Color Coding/Seating Guide [Figure -1]

Yellow areas are to be kept clear.

Red areas are for elderly and disabled passengers.

Green areas are for able bodied passengers.

