



<http://www.latimes.com/news/la-me-transit30jun30,0,2432973,full.story?coll=la-tot-topstories>

From the Los Angeles Times

Near the rails but still on the road

Research casts doubt on the region's strategy of pushing transit-oriented residential projects to get people out of cars.

By Sharon Bernstein and Francisco Vara-Orta

Times Staff Writers

June 30, 2007

TV cameras in tow and champagne at the ready, a dozen of the county's most powerful civic leaders — including the mayor of Los Angeles, L.A. City Council members and county supervisors — touted the latest and glitziest new development in Hollywood: the planned W Hotel and apartments at the storied corner of Hollywood and Vine.

This project, they pledged at the groundbreaking earlier this year, would restore a sagging neighborhood while also minimizing traffic — an important promise in increasingly gridlocked Hollywood.

"People could live here and never use their cars," declared MTA Chief Executive Roger Snoble at the February event.

It's a vision expressed frequently by local government officials, who see building large mixed-use developments next to mass transit lines as a key solution for not just the region's traffic congestion but also its spread-out geography and reputation for being unfriendly to pedestrians.

In Los Angeles alone, billions of public and private dollars have been lavished on transit-oriented projects such as Hollywood & Vine, with more than 20,000 residential units approved within a quarter mile of transit stations between 2001 and 2005.

But there is little research to back up the rosy predictions. Among the few academic studies of the subject, one that looked at buildings in the Los Angeles area showed that transit-based development successfully weaned relatively few residents from their cars. It also found that, over time, no more people in the buildings studied were taking transit 10 years after a project opened than when it was first built.

Los Angeles, with its huge geographic footprint and its limited public transportation system, can't offer residents of these developments the kinds of sophisticated transit networks available in cities like Washington, D.C. — or even smaller ones like Portland — where transit-oriented projects are believed by many to be working.

The Times decided to examine driving habits at four apartment and condominium complexes that have already been built at or near transit stations in South Pasadena, North Hollywood, Pasadena and Hollywood.

Reporters spent two months interviewing residents, counting cars going out of and into the buildings and counting pedestrians walking from the projects to the nearby train stations.

The reporting showed that only a small fraction of residents shunned their cars during morning rush hour. Most people said that even though they lived close to transit stations, the trains weren't convenient enough, taking too long to arrive at destinations and lacking stops near their workplaces. Many complained that they didn't feel comfortable riding the MTA's crowded, often slow-moving buses from transit terminals to their jobs.

Moreover, the attraction of shops and cafes that are often built into developments at transit stations can actually draw more cars to neighborhoods, putting an additional traffic burden on areas that had been promised relief.

Harry Cosmatos, a Kaiser Permanente radiation oncologist, is exactly the type of educated, upscale commuter that planners and transportation experts want to draw via transit-oriented developments.

In 2005, he purchased a townhouse in a project built partly atop the Mission Meridian Gold Line station in South Pasadena.

He works at Kaiser Sunset, which is at a Red Line stop in Hollywood.

He loves his new home, with its craftsman touches and picturesque South Pasadena setting, in arguably the best-designed transit-oriented development in the region.

Cosmatos also likes the Gold Line — it reminds him of the village train near where he went to medical school on Long Island.

But the 36-year-old physician nevertheless drives to work.

The train?

"It's not for me," he said. "Maybe for other people, but not for me."

It takes two trains and at least 45 minutes to get to work on the Gold and Red lines, Cosmatos said.

Driving is 15 minutes faster, he said, and more convenient.

The problem — reluctantly recognized by some of transit-based development's most influential boosters — is that public transportation in Southern California is simply not convenient enough: Either it takes too long to get places or, more important, doesn't take people where they want to go.

The region's transit system is limited, experts say, because it was built on two assumptions that have since proved untrue: that most traffic was generated by commuting trips and that most people worked downtown.

Nowadays, people nationwide are driving so much to take their children to school, run errands and engage in other activities that these trips far outstrip commuting, according to federal transportation statistics.

To make matters worse, almost all of the transit-oriented construction that has so far been approved in the L.A. area is for housing rather than job centers or the village-style shopping areas that planners had originally envisioned.

Barring significant changes, this could mean that tens of thousands of residents will be clustered near train stations they only occasionally use. For most shopping, schools and jobs, they'll still get in their cars.

Film student Isaiah Eller is a good example of the quandary.

The 21-year-old left two cars behind in Michigan, figuring he wouldn't need them when he moved to the Mark apartment building in Hollywood last year.

Just two blocks away from the Hollywood and Vine Red Line station in a neighborhood with plenty of restaurants and shops, Eller considered the vintage building of 101 units a perfect place to live without a car.

But after just a few months, he says he's so frustrated trying to get around Los Angeles on public transportation that he's thinking of bringing both vehicles out from the Midwest.

Using the system here took too long, didn't go where he needed and was unpleasant, he said.

"I've only ridden the bus three times, and that was enough," Eller said.

He's not alone. Although several residents of his building said they had given up their cars, about 30 of the 54 cars in the garage pulled out during morning rush hour.

But such realities haven't stopped or even slowed the wave of projects planned or under construction.

Huge developments in the pipeline include the L.A. Live and Grand Avenue projects downtown and hundreds of units around Metro stations in Hollywood, North Hollywood and the Mid-Wilshire areas.

Countywide, massive apartment and condominium complexes have been developed in Pasadena, South Pasadena, Long Beach and elsewhere.

Backers — who include planners, elected officials and builders — say such development is the best way to avoid a traffic meltdown as 6.3 million anticipated new residents crowd Los Angeles, Orange, Riverside, San Bernardino and Ventura counties over the next 30 years.

Moreover, the developments are appealing to young people and empty nesters because they have a neighborhood feel that traditional sprawling subdivisions often lack, said Gail Goldberg, planning director for the city of Los Angeles.

"You're seeing in California a whole trend toward moving into more urban settings," she said. "People like to walk around and go to a coffee shop, go to the movies. That is a very desirable way to live."

But does that mean people will stop using their cars?

Two related studies, both conducted by UC Berkeley and Cal Poly Pomona, show that people who live near transit tend to use it more than people who don't. But the number is still minuscule compared with the number who drive.

Residents were more likely to use transit only if it took less time than driving, if they could walk to their destinations from the transit stop when they arrived, if they had flexible work hours and if they had limited access to a car.

Otherwise, researchers said, most people tend to drive — particularly if they get free parking at their workplaces.

At the Pacific Court and Bellamar apartments in Long Beach, researchers found, just 6.3% of residents said they used the Metro Blue Line to go to work in 2003. More than 78% of the residents of the transit-based projects said they never used the line.

"The dilemma we have is the destinations," said Robert Cervero, a UC Berkeley urban planning professor who is coauthor of the two studies of transit-oriented developments.

Even though more people are living near transit stations, he said, in Southern California work and school sites are not necessarily near train and bus stops.

That's different from the older East Coast cities, where the urban grid is closely connected to the local transit system.

"That to me is the big difference as to why transit-oriented housing works a lot better in other parts of the world," Cervero said.

In other words, he and others said, in Southern California, the new, denser transit-based housing projects could actually lead to more congestion rather than less.

Take the development where Cosmatos, the cancer doctor, lives.

Before the 67-unit project was built, the land on which it stands held two bungalows, according to South Pasadena officials. If each household had two cars, that would mean a maximum of four cars going in and out each day.

But on the four days The Times counted cars entering and leaving the complex, the picture was quite different. From 6 to 9 a.m. on four weekdays earlier this year, 50 to 60 cars left the residents' parking lot. An additional 75 pulled into the streets around the development on each of the mornings so their drivers could patronize the coffee shop that is built into the project. Still more vehicles — about 50 by 9 a.m. — pulled into a parking lot at the development for people who drive there to use the nearby Gold Line station.

There is another issue facing transit-oriented development: Regional statistics gathered by the Southern California Assn. of Governments show that job centers are moving away from transit lines rather than toward them.

That's exactly what happened for construction industry worker Eric Johnson, who moved to South Pasadena's Mission Meridian project with the intention of taking the Gold Line to his job downtown.

But a few months ago, his company moved to Sun Valley — far from a transit line. So now Johnson drives.

The Times found similar results at the other locations surveyed.

At Academy Village in North Hollywood, which sits about a third of a mile from the North Hollywood transit station, about 120 cars left the building each morning, while fewer than half a dozen residents set off on foot.

In Pasadena, a 350-unit building sits directly over the Del Mar Gold Line station; it was two-thirds leased when The Times did its survey. Of 225 people who got off the train on a recent evening, just one, Cheanell Henderson, headed toward the apartment complex.

She loves the convenience of taking the Gold Line. But she's not so sure about her fellow tenants. "I save a lot of money on car expenses," Henderson said. "But I haven't met any neighbors on the train yet."

sharon.bernstein@latimes.com

francisco.varaorta@latimes.com

If you want other stories on this topic, search the Archives at latimes.com/archives.

TMSReprints

Article licensing and reprint options

Copyright 2007 Los Angeles Times | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)
[Home Delivery](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Archives](#) | [Contact](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Help](#)

PARTNERS:  