



“I Take Public Transit ... But I Hate It”

By George Runner

“I take public transit, but I hate it,” says a student intern who works in my downtown Sacramento office.

In a perfect world, there would be nothing wrong with investing in public transportation. We’re told by government that infrastructure projects like high speed rail will make travel cheaper, more accessible and better for the environment. It’s supposed to be a win-win for everyone.

But we don’t live in a perfect world. And you probably know a few people who have a nightmare story to tell about their time catching the bus or train. The reality is most people don’t have positive opinions about public transit. That raises the question: In our ever-changing-millennial-driven economy, does it make sense to continue diverting billions of dollars to underutilized mass transit systems?

Many people have given up on public transportation because of the long delays and wait times and, in some cases, unclean and unsafe conditions. In Sacramento, the latest number from Regional Transit show total ridership is down nearly 7% compared to last fiscal year, and the number of reported crimes is back on the rise.

In Los Angeles, nearly one in five Metro riders had experienced some form of harassment, including being fondled and indecent exposure. The numbers were even higher prior to a public awareness campaign called “It’s Off Limits.”

There’s another reason people are giving up on public transit: technology.

With the rise of ride sharing networks such as Uber and Lyft, most people don’t see the need to deal with the problems that come with public transportation. These ride sharing services have made transportation quick, reliable and affordable. Best of all—these companies will pick you up at your front door.

Government can’t compete.

Take for example what’s going on in Southern California. Another *Los Angeles Times* report shows that despite a 9 billion dollar investment in new light rail and subway lines, Metro now has fewer boardings than it did three decades ago, when buses were the county’s only transit option. As a matter of fact, transit ridership in the region has been on the decline for roughly a decade.

The same is happening with other mass transit agencies. Bus ridership in Orange County has dropped 30 percent in the last seven years alone. A recent Metro study found that 16 transit providers in Los Angeles County have seen quarterly drops in ridership of 4 to 5 percent.

Yes, ridership can be cyclical. But many experts believe this change in travel behavior could be a permanent shift. One thing is clear: people prefer to be in cars and choose private sector transportation solutions if they can afford it.

Ride sharing services could be better for the environment as well. The big ride sharing companies are currently building out their carpool services. This could lead to fewer cars on the streets—and less demand for costly parking lots and garages. As automotive technology continues to improve, we'll see more environmentally friendly vehicles on the road. In future years, self-driving vehicles could also be an option.

Government needs to get with the times and recognize consumer trends. We need roads, and we need to start investing in them again. So let's stop wasting public dollars trying to get people to do things they're just not interested in. Instead, we should wisely invest California's tax dollars in ways that bolster safe, affordable and environmentally-friendly transportation options of the future.

George Runner represents more than nine million Californians as a taxpayer advocate and elected member of the State Board of Equalization.