

# Orange County Rail Hopes Revived

by Kirk Schneider

In a last-minute turnaround that has surprised nearly everyone, Orange County finally got consensus on a Santa Ana-Costa Mesa-Irvine rail transit starter line that looks buildable.

On October 22, 2001, the Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA) Board of Directors unanimously approved a plan brought forth by the cities of Irvine, Costa Mesa and Santa Ana to send the CenterLine light rail project into preliminary engineering.

The governing councils of all three cities approved moving forward with the next phase on a 20-mile alignment that begins at the Irvine Transportation Center, travels to John Wayne Airport, up Bristol, past South Coast Plaza, and cuts through the Civic Center area of Santa Ana to the Regional Transportation Center. The proposed route would provide excellent connections for Amtrak and Metrolink riders from the north in Santa Ana and the south in Irvine.

Two options could connect the University of California, Irvine and Santa Ana College to the alignment. Future extensions would provide service to The Block, UCI Medical Center, Anaheim Stadium (Edison Field), the Disneyland Resort Area and Fullerton, thus serving additional Amtrak and Metrolink stations in Anaheim and Fullerton.

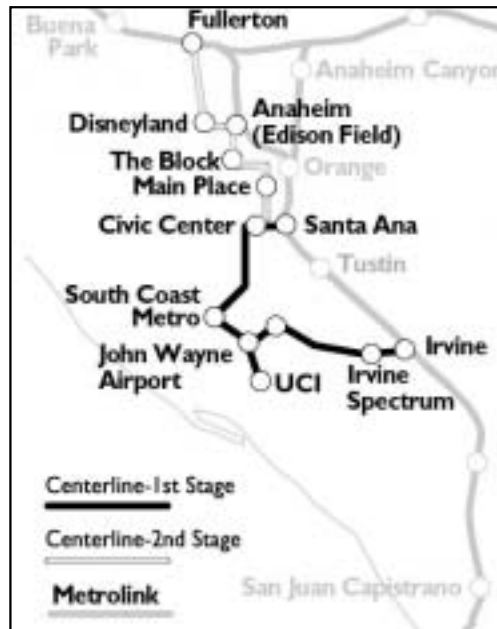
The much-needed rail system, first proposed in the early 1980's, would operate mainly above Orange County's congested arterial streets and freeways providing service directly to local activity centers. Unlike other cities, Orange County had no available railroad right-of-way in the corridor and surface street operation would be much too slow to attract choice riders.

Orange County's "Measure M" local transportation sales tax is expected to generate \$3.1 billion over 20 years. A portion of that amount is allocated for both enhancing the Metrolink rights-of-way and initiating a high capacity urban rail extension to connect Metrolink to employment centers. \$340 million is allocated to the system, for which the rail transit proposal qualifies.

CenterLine was supposed to go to preliminary engineering earlier this year but local cities balked after previous OCTA management neglected to include them in the process.

The OCTA Board of Directors then hired new CEO Art Leahy, who fresh from his recent success in getting the Minneapolis light rail project going after years of debate, wisely put the project on hold while he worked to get consensus among the cities. Leahy, a self-effacing problem-solver, managed to find a formula to proceed after just a few months of work. That's quite an accomplishment, considering that twenty years of planning had led to stalemate.

In the meantime, local transit advocates organized to help generate grassroots support for the CenterLine and improved Metrolink service.



Details of Metrolink service additions have not been confirmed officially, but the word on the street is that either half-hourly or quarter-hourly Metrolink service may be able to run as soon as double tracking of the last segment between Fullerton and Irvine is completed and trainsets found. It is thought that Leahy sees the Metrolink shuttles as strong elements around which coordinated bus service can be structured.

Rail Advocates of Orange County (RAOC) is the organization that has done the most to spur local acceptance of rail. They meet monthly near the Fullerton Transportation Center (Amtrak/Metrolink). They are always looking for new members and can be reached toll-free at 1-866-476-2282 or on their website at [www.railadvocates.org](http://www.railadvocates.org)

## NEW TRAC OFFICERS

Results of the election of TRAC officers included Richard Tolmach as President and Dan McNamara Vice-President for 2002, with Treasurer Bill Kerby and Secretary Bruce Jenkins continuing in their posts. Outgoing President Arthur Lloyd continues as a board member. One new member, Neil Bjornsen, joined the board. Chairman Emeritus William Scholz and Vice President George Gaekel were thanked for their years of service.

At the December Board Meeting, outgoing Executive Director Ric Silver was replaced at Sacramento TRAC headquarters by new administrative Director Alan C. Miller.

Miller has been piecing together the membership and organizational files, at the same time as reviving TRAC's legislative presence. Last month he made presentations at the Planning and Conservation League legislative symposium and Board Meeting, and started an e-mail effort to raise public awareness about the threats to Amtrak.

## TRAC Annual Meeting Notes

TRAC's November 15 meeting at the Burbank Airport Hilton featured strong panels on Southern California light rail starts and commuter rail, as well as an illuminating discussion of pending coordination between Metrolink trains and Amtrak Surfliners.

Representatives from the Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA) and the Pasadena light rail line both had amazing tales of revival of rail projects once thought dead. OCTA's CEO Art Leahy described steps in obtaining the newly approved Centerline agreement (see story on left).

Thomas Stone, Chief Project Officer of the Pasadena project gave an overview of history and current status of construction on this revived turnkey project. The light rail line will connect L.A. Union Station with Pasadena via Chinatown and Arroyo Seco. The line will initially be 13.7 miles, all double-tracked with 13 stations, projected to carry 33,000 passengers daily. Target date for service is July 2003. Peak headway will be 7.5 minutes. At Union Station, the line will use Tracks 1 and 2. No connection will be made to the existing Blue Line (to Long Beach). The route is now the Gold Line.

Two relatively short portions of the line will be underground (cut and cover) including a few blocks of the Old Pasadena portion. The project is having major problems with California Public Utilities Commission staff, which is trying to force addition of grade separations. For further info on status, see the web site: [www.la-pasblueline.org](http://www.la-pasblueline.org).

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Darrell Clark of Expo-Rail gave a brief talk on the citizen-initiated L.A. to Culver City/Santa Monica proposal, and its June 2001 success in obtaining approval from the MTA. The route follows an existing, but basically abandoned freight rail line along Exposition Blvd past the Stables Center (sports venue), USC, and many museums, industries, and businesses. About 800,000 people live in the service corridor. Over 50,000 riders per day are forecast. Details of the route: [members.aol.com/friends4expo](http://members.aol.com/friends4expo).

David Solow of Metrolink gave a detailed update on its success. Growth continues, with 416 route miles, about 128 daily trains, and about 33,000 daily riders. Metrolink has 33 locomotives on order, plus 28 new cars from Bombardier. Two new stations are due to open soon in Orange County on the Orange County line: Tustin and Laguna Nigel. Both will serve trains between LAUS and Oceanside, and between San Bernardino and San Juan Capistrano. Metrolink is working with FRA staff to improve speeds. The desire is to increase 90 mph segments to 110 mph, and some 79 mph segments to 90 mph.

Metrolink travel is very dispersed; 76% of inbound riders go through LAUS, but 56% have destinations other than LAUS. A third of riders make under \$50,000 annually, contrary to the image of commuters being upper income riders. 67% formerly drove alone.

The Code Sharing/Track Sharing panel with OCTA, Metrolink and TRAC, covered technology and politics of separate operators sharing either train seats or track capacity. Solow said new ticket machines will be implemented which sell both Metrolink and Amtrak tickets for through service in a single transaction. Metrolink and Amtrak are also discussing coordinated scheduling.