

# Train is still partying, please drink beer! Train is still partying, please drink beer! It's the California Transportation Follies of 2004

## Yackety Yack, Don't Talk Back

You should be glad that trains don't talk yet in your neighborhood, say Sacramento residents. Light rail trains started talking when the South Line opened last year, reportedly to satisfy ADA regulations for the blind. Residents say trains talk too loud, too much and mostly say stupid things. According to Regional Transit staff, a German firm known for messages like: "Nächste halt: Heumarkt [und] Vorsicht bei die abfahrt" was the source for the system which produces eerie synthesized speech. The English used turns out to be far more verbose, as in "Meadowview Line train. The next stop is Sixteenth Street Station." and "Train is departing, please stand clear." The trains are so intrusive that at least one streetcorner evangelist on K Street has been observed talking back to them. The 22 echoing unintelligible syllables make station environs unpleasant, especially since trains don't shut up until 1 am and start blabbing again just after 4 am. Has anyone at Regional Transit heard of "Undisclosed Negative Environmental Impact?" And does it make any sense to call something a stop *and* a station, or to tell people to stand clear after the train has already dinged its bell three times and started moving? Blah, blah, blah.

## God Listens in on Governor's Infrastructure Pitch, Targets Road & Rail Flaws Statewide

Just as Gov. Schwarzenegger was proposing to avoid a tax hike by again raiding the state highway fund, seizing \$1.3 billion, on top of \$1.4 billion last year — another wild storm was destroying California roads and rails. As George Skelton pointed out in the *Los Angeles Times*, when running for governor, the Governor declared: "You can't ever say never [on raising taxes] because we could have next year an earthquake. We could have a natural disaster..."

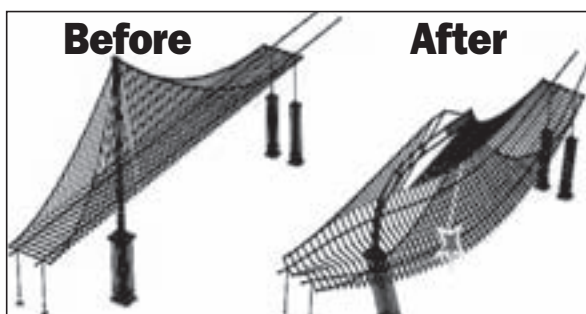
Many Californians would consider this past winter's flooding and mud slides, which closed highways and railways all over the state to be exactly such a natural disaster.

## The San Joaquins, Route of the Bouncing Cookies

To demonstrate the lack of freshness in a batch of lemon cookies offered for sale in January on the *San Joaquins*, a lounge attendant bounced one off his stainless steel counter and caught it in midair. Happily,



there was no damage to the cookie or the counter, but on further inspection, a possible reason for the lack of freshness emerged. Each of the cookies in his drawer had a date sticker over a previous date sticker. There must have been other people who noticed the problem. Latest word on the lemon cookies is that they have been replaced with new dessert offers. Hopefully fresher ones, too.



## Newest MTC Innovation: The Self-Collapsing Bay Bridge

According to world-renowned UC Berkeley engineering expert Abdolhassan Astaneh, the unique design of the self-anchored suspension bridge makes it vulnerable to total collapse from a minor car bomb, if the bomb is detonated anywhere near the eastern end of the span. MTC's manipulation of the selection process is blamed by most observers for the unsafe design as well as cost overruns which has brought projected cost of the span to \$6 billion.

According to other structural experts, the remaining 1.2 miles of the bridge is nearly as collapsible as the suspension span. Instead of conventional steel structures or modern steel space frames, the viaduct is constructed of extra-light concrete sections post-tensioned with cables just under roadway surfaces holding the segments together. The design was developed previous to terrorist concerns, and according to Caltrans officials, never reconsidered. A blast any-

where along the viaduct except at the supports could drop an entire 500 foot segment in the drink.

As Emeryville Mayor Ken Bukowski has observed, the only purpose of using concrete instead of steel for the bridge seems to have been to prevent it from being able to carry rails. Instead of the Bay Bridge having capacity to handle a nearly endless growth of transbay traffic, Bukowski notes it becomes a permanent blockage to the Bay Area economy.

The Governor should be concerned that there are other serious downsides of having a wimpy underbuilt concrete structure with one-third the carrying capacity of the existing bridge. One is that it is extremely vulnerable to seismic events as well as terrorist ones.

Sounds ever more like the original seismic retrofit project costing less than \$1 billion was a smarter move than the designed-for-disaster \$6.2 billion fiasco. If the Governor had the courage to force the project back to the drawing board, he might discover that the real cost for making the bridge safe and adding capacity via rail is still around \$1.5 billion.



## EuroStar Web Ads Promote 25 Euro Streak to London

A web picture is worth a thousand words. While California train advertising has used mostly traditional media and become terminally dull, entrepreneurial European carriers

keep notching up the excitement using web ads to target niche markets. For the French market, EuroStar has been using an animated snap of a pair of streakers at a British soccer match to signal a quick getaway for two from Paris to London. To many Parisians, the video snap is a perfect evocation of Britain: public mischief around football, and even a London bobby pursuing the miscreants. Despite current \$1.30 per euro exchange rates, the price is as compelling as the presentation.



## SUV Drivers Should Be More Worried About Their Weight

According to a posting by web author Andy Bowers on Microsoft's Slate magazine web site, California has outlawed big SUVs on many of its roads but doesn't seem to know it.

Says Bowers, "unless you drive one of the largest SUVs [Chevy Suburban, Cadillac Escalade, or Ford Excursion] I'll bet you've watched them thundering down quiet residential lanes and wondered to yourself: Why is that monster allowed on this little street? Well, here's a surprising piece of news. It may not be. Cities throughout California—the nation's largest car market—prohibit the

heaviest SUVs on many of their residential roads. The problem is, they don't seem to know they've done it."

Bowers discovered the secret ban after noticing signs at both ends of his narrow L.A.-area street clearly prohibiting vehicles over 6,000 pounds. He got to thinking: "Could some of those bigger SUVs exceed 3 tons? So I did some research, and I hit the mother lode. It turns out every big SUV and pickup is too heavy for my street."

Makes you wonder how many other streets, even in your own neighborhood, are signed for 3 tons.

## Economic Terror Alert: Will the Fruit of the Loom Bomb Arrive by Container Train?

The tenfold rise of Chinese textile imports following lifting of an import quota has devastated much of what was left of the U.S. industry in just three months. Homeland security planners have been painfully cognizant of the dangers of weapons of mass destruction arriving in containers, but they may have misconstrued the shape of the primary danger. As Philip Stevens in the *Financial Times* has observed, the United States hasn't come to terms with China's massive economic power.

For example, planned purchases of container ships by Chinese firms are equivalent to 35,000 miles of U.S. railroad capacity. Just imagine what that is going to do to the

tracks from the Port of Los Angeles to everywhere on the Union Pacific.

Forget using weapons. Given Union Pacific and the rest of the railroad industry's allergy to needed investment in capital facilities, the Chinese could cripple U.S. transportation facilities just by sending containers of furniture, power tools and underwear.

## How General Motors Plans to Save the US Industrial Economy

An all-out push to concentrate on the biggest SUV models is GM's stated plan to revive its flagging sales, following a month of bad news which included General Electric's financing unit pulling back \$2 billion of credit, for fear that the company would not be able to repay the loan. "Let's not squander all our resources on trying to overcome negative momentum.

Let's put the resources where we've got positive momentum, which is basically Cadillac, Hummer and GMC," GM Vice-Chairman Bob Lutz said at the New York Auto Show, according to AP.

This quote came from the same edition of a newspaper which also mentioned record high gasoline prices. Since that time, Salomon Brothers has projected that oil prices may go to \$105 per barrel within a year. Too bad GM doesn't seem to have charted out a Plan B.

Please send transportation items of humorous interest care of Ben Biaggini, TRAC, 926 J St. Suite 1107, Sacramento CA 95814

## A Fine Alternative to San Joaquin Cuisine A TRAC FIELD REPORT FROM BAKERSFIELD

by Alan C. Miller

Quality Mexican food can be a fine alternative to your usual San Joaquin café fare should you be lucky enough to be on an early bus into Bakersfield. The Mexicali Restaurant is located a brisk five minute walk from the Bakersfield station, and well worth the walk for an adventurous, hungry rail traveler weary of microwaved burgers, packaged pizza and entrees "made with Chef Mario's personal touch."

San Joaquin busses from the LA basin are scheduled to arrive in Bakersfield about 15 minutes before train departure. However, it is not at all uncommon for busses to arrive 15 or 20 minutes earlier if there is little traffic. If your bus is early, you are hungry, and you are up for a brisk walk, read on.

Walk north on the depot driveway to the stoplight, cross 18th Street and continue north on S Street. In one block, S Street dead-ends into 17th Street and a triangular-shaped Jewish temple building will be in front of you. Turn left and proceed one block west to the corner of 17th and R where a very prominent neon sign with an arrow points the way (right up R Street) to the Mexicali Restaurant. Save steps by not using the front entrance on 16th Street. Instead, turn right about a third of a block up R Street and proceed diagonally through the small rear parking lot to the restaurant's closest door.

Inside, you will find the front counter half way down the hall on the right. Immediately tell the cashier or waitress that you are taking the train and need a to-go meal as fast as they can prepare it. They will hand you a menu; make your choice quickly, all choices are good. Pay while the food is being cooked. They make a special effort to get your meal made fast—it usually takes 5 to 7 minutes. Return to the back door and retrace your 400 steps to trainside.

On an example recent trip, we arrived at 5:07pm for a scheduled 5:25pm arrival and a 5:40pm departure. I walked briskly and arrived at the Mexicali at 5:12pm. I had my food in hand at 5:20. I arrived back at the train at

5:24pm. Total time bus to restaurant to train: 17 minutes. Not having to eat a Chef Mario meal: priceless.

I wouldn't recommend trying this unless your bus arrives at least 25 minutes prior to train departure. And don't ever try this on the southbound train to bus schedule unless you want to be stranded. You should make sure you can secure your luggage with your traveling companion or carry it with you, and you should have at least one hand free to carry the food, which must be carried flat.

The Mexicali Restaurant opens at 11am every day except Sunday when they open a half-hour later. They close a 9pm daily and an hour later Friday and Saturday. Thus, this should work for the three later trains, #715, #717 and #703. Meals are reasonably priced, with two-item combination plates with rice and beans ranging from \$6.50 to \$8.50. The staff at the restaurant are extremely nice and very accommodating to rail passengers. I have done this about a half-dozen times with no problems.

I haven't tried calling ahead on a cell phone, but it is possible they could have your meal ready when you arrive if you know what you want. I wouldn't call until the bus is in Bakersfield and you are sure you have time to make the trek. Their number is (661) 327-3861.

Once on the train, enjoy your meal while other passengers look on enviously from their frozen, microwaved bean & cheese burrito.



Even if you don't have time to order Mexican takeout, you can take the amazing triangular architectural tour in less than 10 minutes by following the route described in the article above. Even Mexicali's sign has



## WHICH SERVICES DO YOU GO TO IN BAKERSFIELD?