

Who is Served by Empty Buses?

by **Richard F. Tolmach**

California's feeder bus network serving state Amtrak trains began from the progressive idea to develop state entrepreneurship, along the lines of a practical Swiss governmental enterprise. Governor Deukmejian's capable appointee Dana Reed pushed for more buses, since they helped California fill its San Joaquin and San Diegan trains and cut subsidies to a minimum.

The bus network deserves credit for most of the financial success of California's rail program. The San Joaquin Route owes more of its revenue to these bus routes started in the 80's than any capital improvements done in the past decade. Unfortunately, most rail managers still don't understand or appreciate the buses. In the past decade, modal bias and love of station and track projects has led to an unfortunate neglect of the buses in planning, marketing and sales.

For example, current Northern California ads promoting San Joaquin use completely ignore existence of southern California Amtrak destinations, although trips to and from these cities still provide the majority of San Joaquin revenues.

This backward attitude towards buses has led to a string of bad bus service decisions that started in 1993 and extended to earlier this year. The only clearly successful feeder bus route begun in the past ten years was designed by Caltrans rail staffer Steve Tinker, who charted out a highly profitable Santa Barbara-San Luis Obispo-San Jose feeder to the Capitol Corridor. It currently averages about 16 passengers per run, highest in the state for a single-trip-daily route.

Tinker, a former Southern Pacific and Bechtel employee who fell victim to mental illness after his bus planning duties were taken away, is not a fond memory for rail staff. His mention still elicits expressions of sadness and regret, along with some guilt about how he was treated. Perhaps his fate figures into the difficulty of getting Caltrans to focus on the problems that have plagued bus decisions ever since.

The biggest problem is that buses seem to have become pawns or bargaining chips in dealing with local constituencies. Just as Amtrak years ago launched political trains such as the Blue Ridge with embarrassingly bad ridership statistics, Caltrans now has political buses.

A year ago, it was discovered that three state-supported Amtrak bus routes had been running for years with less than one rider per trip. The ailing routes were the Long Beach-San Juan Capistrano extension of the Bakersfield-Long Beach route, Solvang-Surf, and Visalia-Hanford. Caltrans verified the numbers after much turmoil among staff, but cut no buses. By comparison, the Capitol Corridor, which learned at the same time about their own empty buses, cut them by the May Amtrak schedule change.

Finally, with the October 27 schedule change came the first signs of Caltrans action. It had to come. After all, buses with less than one rider clearly lose money, and state law does prohibit

Caltrans from running buses which lose money.

Caltrans asked Amtrak to cut the Coach USA segment (1601 rides on 2920 buses in fiscal 2002) between San Juan Capistrano and Long Beach, saving about \$250,000 annually. Sadly, it left alone three other vacant routes (1936 rides on 3226 buses), which survive at a daily cost of \$1300 and an annual cost of about \$400,000.

In the case of the fabulously underpopulated Surf-Solvang route, (1005 rides on 1460 buses in 2002) the political force keeping the service seems to be a parallel deal hatched by the City of Lompoc. In July 2001, Lompoc signed a contract with American Star Tours (AST) for \$1.7 million annually for three years to operate local transit. Caltrans collaborated with Lompoc and AST on a federal grant to provide equipment.

On any given day, it is likely that you can be the sole passenger on buses 4874 or 4877, the pair that connect Lompoc to or from San Luis Obispo via a Surf train connection. On the other two runs, sporadic traffic consisting primarily of monthly passes rarely rises above two passengers. Solvang-Surf is a highly nonsensical route for Caltrans but does make sense for AST. After all, it helps the vendor keep control of the SLO-Santa Barbara bus contract. The City of Lompoc has been asked by Caltrans to pay a pittance toward costs to avoid disrupting that contract.

Hanford-Visalia is a similar add-on to the Hanford-Santa Maria bus contract that makes it hard for other vendors to compete by starting the route in Orange Belt Stages' home town. It's not so expensive to run, but Caltrans shouldn't pay. In FY 2002, 626 riders were on 1460 buses.

Despite full knowledge of vacant buses to Visalia, Caltrans started a second link between Visalia and the trains last March 18, also using Orange Belt. Caltrans now wastes nearly \$1000 daily on 8 buses linking Porterville, Visalia and other Tulare County cities to the trains, but obtains less than 5 passengers a day.

Tulare County, which also hires Orange Belt to run rural service linking Porterville and Visalia paralleling the vacant San Joaquin bus feeder, is apparently an essential ally of the rail program. On May 21, soon after the new service started, a Tulare County Supervisor co-signed a letter to Maria Contreras-Sweet, Secretary of Business, Transportation and Housing asking that the San Joaquin marketing budget be doubled, to an unprecedented \$10,000,000 annually. By comparison, a \$300,000 giveaway is peanuts.

Despite these local politics, Caltrans should continue paring unsuccessful buses, and use the savings to help expand frequencies on routes with better promise. The addition of a fourth round trip in October linking Santa Barbara and Oxnard to the San Joaquins was the first positive step in years. A new Bay Area feeder to the Surfliners will begin December 14. With luck, it will work as well as Mr. Tinker's bus, which averages about \$600 revenue for the Capitols each time it runs, more than certain trains.

