

Choice For What Purpose

Two phrases keep appearing in the literature and statements coming from our transportation representatives; “ We can’t afford to keep building new roads” and “ We need to provide choice”. These phrases are repeated continuously like old saws as if to apply the tenet that any idea, repeated often enough, becomes accepted as truth. Indeed they have become accepted as truth within California transportation circles and a portion of the public. But accepting them as truth only has the effect of cutting off intelligent discussion on the subject. They become substitutes for considerate thought like short bite campaign commercials. These phrases are euphemisms for public transportation and are used by proponents to rationalize their message. They have become campaign slogans, and like all such slogans, one should sit back and ponder their meaning from time to time.

The concept of choice competes with the notion that various segments of our population require means of transportation other than automobiles and that in various circumstances other means of transportation are more desirable and effective. The goal of providing a means of transportation to everyone that needs it and to do it in the most effective manner is not being debated. Indeed if we stick to this goal we would improve our transportation planning process. This is not the idea now encompassed in the concept of choice. The current concept of choice implies the need to provide everyone with alternative means of transportation.

Why does anyone want or need choice in transportation. If one had two alternatives to go to work, or school, or shopping, would one choose a different option each day just to get variety? One would determine the best alternative by considering which is most convenient and affordable according to our criteria. That alternative would become our mode of transportation every day, day after day. Transportation is not in the same sphere as fashion, entertainment, or food. In these pursuits we regard variety as a much sought after feature. Choice from variety adds to our pleasure. Except for the occasional pleasure ride, transportation on a daily basis has not achieved the luxury of itself being a pleasure. We travel to work, school, shopping and other destinations as a means of getting there and our primary criteria is, how fast. We would all prefer to have one convenient and fast means to get to our destination rather than two not so fast and convenient means. Transportation funding is a limited resource. It is best used to find a solution that provides everyone with access to the best available means of transportation rather than provide everyone with multiple but less efficient means. Choice cannot come for free