

## **Make Maximum Use of Our Scarce Land Resources**

Environmentalists should be particularly upset with the blooming toll road industry in Orange County. Not only has the county given up some of its unique undeveloped wilderness areas to support the transportation requirements of its continuously increasing population and employment base, but it has done it in a manner which makes low use of its non replaceable land resources. Freeways in Orange County carry 206,000 to 328,000 vehicles daily. The toll roads on the other hand only carry 38,000 to 74,000 vehicles daily. Using county published figures, the efficiency of toll roads, as measured by vehicle capacity per acre of land, is only about 20 percent that of the freeways. While we are unable to stop population growth, which lies behind our transportation needs, we can at least make better use of our land for transportation.

Some environmentalists might consider this situation to be quite satisfactory. Keeping roadway traffic capacity low creates increased congestion, which then is supposed to convince travelers to seek other solutions such as bus or rail. That logic however does not seem to reflect reality and is flawed. While congestion on our roads remains high the well-publicized growth in bus usage in Orange County has barely kept ahead of population growth and still only accounts for about two percent of daily trips. The bus system predominantly serves sections of the population that do not have access to automobiles, not those who have a daily choice. The much-touted Metrolink system, which carries several thousand passengers a day, represents such a small fraction of the daily traffic as to be almost inconsequential.

What the environmentalist should consider is: having given up land for tollroads which does not maximize transportation effectiveness, the county will surely be forced to consider the need for constructing additional transportation capacity much sooner than it would otherwise. If the SR-91 private tollway and the SR-73 and SR-241 corridor roadways carried loads similar to all the other freeways, then the future need for additional roads would be reduced. In the end, the amount of land converted for new roadways could be reduced.

But beyond the currently planned toll roads the county is not planning to build any major new high speed roadways. The Orange County Transportation Authority's long range "Fastforward" plan includes adding more high occupancy (HOV) lanes and improved connectors to existing freeways, developing a light rail system and street improvements by implementing the Master Plan of Arterial Highways. But the county is faced with a projected 25 percent growth in population and 68 percent increase in employment. Traffic is projected to increase by 43 percent. These programs hardly seem up to the task of supporting the future additional transportation needs. The largest FastForward project is to build a light rail system from Fullerton to Irvine for at a cost of \$2 billion. Projections are that this system will carry about 60,000 daily passengers. This may seem like a significant number but compared to the more than 7 million daily person trips, it is less than one percent of our commutes. Furthermore, it is expected that the vast majority of light rail travelers would otherwise be bus users so that the net reduction in congestion will be very small.

The argument put forward is that we can no longer afford to build new roads. Why is that so? The OCTA is planning to build a \$1.8 billion light rail system, funded mostly by Federal Transit Administration grants and new taxes. Suppose that instead of spending the \$1.8 billion ( plus all the operating subsidies) on light rail, the county had built the SR-73 and SR-241 roadways. The cost of these toll roads, totaling 39 miles in length, was \$2 billion. As freeways, these roads could carry over 205,000 daily vehicles each instead of about 110,000 total now projected. That could be a net gain of over 300,000 daily passengers. Even at half these free flow rates there is a significant net gain. Recent data from the SR-241 opening free first week traffic counts confirms the potential for increased traffic flow without tolls. What we would have given up is a light rail capacity of 60,000 passengers. The net effect is almost a 500 percent gain in capability. If rail is such an effective means of transit why don't we sell bonds and make rail self supporting like the tollroads.

The toll roads are now built but it is not too late to fix the fundamental problem. We should now consider ways of rapidly retiring the debt on those roads and so that we can open them up to free access as soon as possible. The experience we have had in the last few years is that tolls cause a tremendous reduction on road usage, which translates into very poor land use efficiency. Tolls and social engineering do not make the best use of funding or land. While funding such projects is a major issue, it is not impossible. What is not possible is the ability to replace our open land. The onslaught and impact of population growth will not be stopped by transportation plans but we can at least minimize its effect by efficient land. Efficient land use means providing a system that actually serves the most commuters, not the toll road bond holders or the rail social engineers.