

WHAT'S THE ALTERNATIVE TO BETTER TRANSIT AND ACTIVE TRANSPORTATION?

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Whenever there's a proposal to change how we use our streets or invest in alternatives to single-occupancy vehicles, opposition is almost certain to follow. Concerns about worsening congestion are the most common argument against such changes, but cost, parking, safety, equity, and even culture and hazy notions of "personal freedom" are also often invoked.

When these concerns are raised, it's best to respond with a question: "If you don't support this proposal, what should we do instead? What's the alternative?"

This question is important because in growing cities of a certain minimum density—and even in cities with stable populations located within growing regions—a plan to do nothing is a commitment to steadily worsening mobility. Without viable mobility alternatives, when population grows the number of cars will grow with it, clogging streets for other drivers, slowing down buses, and creating unsafe conditions for people walking and bicycling.

This downward spiral causes residents with the privilege of choice to abandon transit and active transportation, leaving the young, the elderly, the poor, and people with disabilities to fend for themselves on a failing system. It leaves drivers worse off as more cars compete for limited road space, causing everyone to spend more time stuck in traffic and more money on vehicle upkeep. And it leaves us with a less environmentally sustainable and healthy society, where cement and asphalt dominate the public realm and nearly every trip requires the use of a personal car. Expanding car infrastructure may temporarily delay these negative impacts, but [eventually demand catches up](#) and we're right back where we started – with even more cars on the road and more asphalt and parking to maintain.

Doing nothing is a dead-end path, while investing more into car infrastructure merely forestalls the inevitable.

Investing in public transit, bike paths, and pedestrian infrastructure can do the opposite. When more people drive, every existing driver is worse off. When more people ride transit, walk, and bicycle, society benefits. The downward spiral is replaced with a virtuous cycle.

More riders mean more fare revenue for public transit that can be reinvested into additional service. Higher ridership drives support for dedicated bus lanes, upgraded stations and stops, and improved first/last-mile connections, all of which serve to further grow ridership and funding. As these services improve, residents can spend dramatically less money on their daily transportation needs and those who can't drive have more accessible and convenient options. As a result, people are given the opportunity to live healthier lifestyles and reduce their impact on the environment. Land use also evolves, creating a multiplier effect for affordability, mobility, health, safety, and sustainability.

None of this is to say that becoming a less car-dependent region will immediately benefit everyone. Change is difficult, and it rarely happens without some amount of sacrifice. But as UCLA professor of Urban Planning Michael Manville [wrote](#) in 2017, the normalcy of the status quo “prevents us from thinking about its fairness.” Provided with a blank slate, it’s hard to imagine that we would willingly recreate a transportation system that relegates huge swathes of our population to second-class status based on age, ability, or income; or pave over so much land, at incalculable expense, for vehicles that stay parked 90% of the day; or subject so many people to miserable, unhealthy commutes for 2 or more hours per day; or emit millions of tons of greenhouse gases and other pollutants into the same communities where we live and work. If we wouldn’t recreate it from scratch then we shouldn’t be working to perpetuate it, either.

Some may point to nascent technological advancements, especially autonomous vehicles (AVs), as a reason to double down on car infrastructure and avoid investing in “old” technologies like trains and buses. This is short-sighted for a few reasons, not least because it would be akin to delaying climate change adaptation in the hopes of a future technology saving us from making difficult decisions today. Further, those being harmed by an overly car-dependent environment shouldn’t have to wait upwards of 10 or 20 years for relief, assuming relief comes at all. There are also serious questions about whether autonomous vehicles will be a net positive for cities, with outcomes being very dependent on the legal and political framework in which they operate. Regardless of who’s driving, low-occupancy AVs would still be spatially inefficient and wouldn’t solve the fundamental problem of too little road space for too many people. In that sense we’ll still depend on using our mobility resources more efficiently, likely favoring autonomous buses and shuttles—and infrastructure to support them—over personal cars.

The most important changes we make to our transportation system won’t be the most expensive or technologically advanced. They won’t be the billions we spend on subways and highways, but the political capital spent changing lane markings and zoning regulations. In LA County it’s been relatively easy to garner supermajority support for massive financial investments in our transportation system, and much more daunting to repaint our streets to prioritize people on buses, bikes, and their own two feet. It’s easy to convince people to support adding a rail line to existing transportation options; less so if that line takes away space already allocated to cars. But this is exactly the trade-off we need. We may be able to widen our freeways in limited circumstances (though we generally shouldn’t), but we can’t expand local roads across the region without wholesale displacement of residents and businesses, and an even more sprawling built environment. Fitting more people onto our highways only to funnel them onto existing neighborhood streets will not create healthier and more mobile communities. We have to use our roadways more efficiently, and that will require reallocating space from car-centric uses into dedicated space for buses and other compact or high-occupancy modes.

We can’t create a region where traffic doesn’t exist, and that shouldn’t be our aspiration. No region of our size or density has successfully eliminated congestion because congestion is a sign of vibrancy and dynamism. It’s evidence that we’ve created a place where many people want to be, and we shouldn’t shy away from that. What we *can* do, and what we should strive to do, is offer an alternative to congestion for those who would take it.

It's fair to ask how this argument holds up when, despite increased spending, we're seeing declining transit ridership throughout Southern California. The answer is that money is not a replacement for political will, and we need both for these investments to pay off.

Buses serve 70% of daily transit trips in LA County but average travel speeds have [slowed by 13%](#) due to worsening congestion, caused in large part by [an increasing number of cars](#) on the road. There aren't enough transportation dollars in the entire state to replace every bus line with grade-separated rail. We're caught in a downward spiral and we need a way out. The solutions outlined above—especially the inexpensive but politically challenging reallocation of space, away from cars toward more efficient modes—are how we get there.

We have two choices. One is the transportation system we have today, where most people drive and those who can't are stuck with lifeline service. In that system everyone gets where they're going very slowly, and their trips get slower all the time. The other path prioritizes people who use the most affordable and sustainable modes, rewarding them with fast, reliable travel. Neither choice eliminates congestion, but the second one offers people an alternative to it.

Enrique Peñalosa, former mayor of Bogotá, Colombia, says that “an advanced city is not one where even the poor use cars, but one where even the rich use public transport.” In Southern California we have a growing population where cars exceed road capacity and millions of households can't afford the costs of automobile ownership. Unless we're content with steadily worsening congestion and disregard for the fortunes of our most vulnerable neighbors, improving public transit and active transportation represents the only viable path forward.