



August 14, 2008

To: Transit Committee
AL
From: Arthur T. Leahy, Chief Executive Officer
Subject: Los Angeles – San Diego Rail Corridor Service Integration Focus Group Findings

Overview

To support an initiative to improve rail service along the Los Angeles – San Diego Rail Corridor, four focus groups have been conducted. Customer and non-customer attitudes and perceptions about current transit service and service integration options have been gathered. This report provides a summary of key findings and lessons learned.

Recommendation

Receive and file as an information item.

Background

The Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA), in cooperation with the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (Metro), the North County Transit District (NCTD), the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG), the Southern California Regional Rail Authority (SCRRA) and the Los Angeles-San Diego-San Luis Obispo (LOSSAN) Rail Corridor Agency, is exploring options to coordinate and improve commuter and intercity rail services between Los Angeles and San Diego (LOSSAN corridor).

The varying services, station stops, fares, and schedules often confuse passengers and generate a multitude of inquiries and suggestions for improvement. The overall goal of integrating rail services is to make the LOSSAN corridor easier to use and a more attractive transit option to expand the market and increase ridership. To support this goal, market research is being conducted. The first phase, qualitative focus group research, is complete. Quantitative research is under development and is scheduled for later this year.

Discussion

Rea & Parker Research has implemented four focus groups to explore attitudes and perceptions about LOSSAN corridor rail transit service in order to make improvements and attract new riders. Below are findings from existing rail transit riders.

Existing Rail Transit Riders

Two focus group discussions were conducted with existing Metrolink and Amtrak customers, some of which also used the Coaster (San Diego commuter rail) service on occasion. Participants were selected using monthly pass holder data and screened to ensure they had used the train at least twice per week during the past three months.

On June 11, 2008, a focus group discussion with Orange County residents living in or north of Santa Ana was held and on June 24, 2008, a discussion with Orange County residents living in or south of Santa Ana was held.

Findings were:

- Participants who regularly commute by train are primarily interested in service improvements to support their daily commute. They lobby for earlier and later trains during the week and wish to alleviate crowded conditions during peak periods. They indicate that the feeder system in downtown Los Angeles is much more developed than the one in Orange County.
- Riders view Amtrak and Metrolink as interchangeable and are willing to ride whatever train meets their scheduling needs. The time a train is scheduled is far more important than the particular train (Amtrak or Metrolink). However, they report that parking at some train stations is not adequate and the station one parks at dictates the system he/she uses for the return trip. Amtrak does not stop at all stations so there may be difficulty in returning to the station where the car is parked.
- Participants would like to have the option of purchasing Coaster tickets at Amtrak/Metrolink stations and vice versa. They also want to be able to purchase one ticket from point A to point B irrespective of the train system. In addition, it was felt that all systems should be consolidated so that schedules and tickets are similar in appearance.

- The prospect of a unified schedule for the three train systems was well received. Participants were positive about the possibility of having the schedule for all trains in the corridor on one page. The schedule could appear on a consolidated website, where it could be viewed on a computer and could be printed for reference. It could also be attached to the walls at train stations.
- Participants indicate they currently do not use the service extensively on weekends or during other non-peak periods. They view the train as a weekday mode and generally do not wish to endure scheduling challenges on the weekends. In many cases, the lack of late night trains and the overall infrequency of trains on weekends inhibit train travel for special events and for other recreational travel and shopping. However, they would ride if schedules were enhanced.
- Train riders are willing to use the train if the time commitment is no more than 50 percent greater than the driving commitment.
- They would entertain using the train to travel to San Diego to visit such attractions as Petco Park and the San Diego Zoo. They would also visit beaches, South Coast Plaza, the Irvine Spectrum, and various other tourist attractions on weekends. There also was some interest in attending night games at Anaheim Stadium if trains were available after the game.
- Riders report Amtrak trains have more room in the seating area than Metrolink trains and Amtrak seats are more comfortable. Amtrak trains tend to be dirtier (especially windows) but the participants enjoy the refreshments that are available. They also say the Amtrak website is more user friendly and helpful than the Metrolink website and Amtrak communicates better with its clientele and is more dependable than Metrolink.
- Regular train users view the availability of electronic real-time information at the stations, transmitting information about delays to cell phones, a consolidated LOSSAN timetable and website, and on-board information as the most important potential service features or ones that should be enhanced. It is important this information be simple and straightforward with reports on train arrival times, delays, and the cause of the delay. On-train information should be visual only and not have an audio component.

- Important selling points to attract train riders are convenience of the service and system reliability. However, riders feel the greatest single motivator for recruiting new train riders is the high cost of gas.
- To attract new train riders, some participants suggested additional businesses and companies, especially along the LOSSAN corridor, should become actively involved in an incentive program that provides transportation reimbursements and other incentives to employees who use transit for their commute.
- The flat fare of \$1.00 per stop for short trips is seen by many as an incentive to recruit new train riders. If the \$1.00 per stop fare were adopted, it would be important that new riders have a positive experience or their ridership is not likely to be sustained.
- Riders commented they felt the use of television, the Internet, and radio should be used to promote rail ridership.
- Train rider focus group participants view the following possible service features as less important to them: freeway signs that show train information, airport connections, a café car on the train, and the availability of wireless internet at the stations.

Non-Users of the Train

On June 25, 2008 and July 1, 2008, two non-rider focus group discussions were held. The first consisted of Orange County residents who were non-regular users of the train but had used transit at least 15-20 times in their adult life. The second were residents that had used transit less than 15-20 times in their adult life. These groups report:

- There is a lack of easily accessible information available to those who would like to consider commuting or traveling by train for recreational purposes. The thought of using the train provokes anxiety in some and even fear in others. Non-users have minimal knowledge about the location of stations near their home or work, and they are not confident about how to use the available feeder system to move them from the train station to their final destination.
- Non-riders with some train experience point to rail systems in other parts of the world and in other parts of the United States. They believe other

systems are much more effective in transporting people efficiently to a greater number of places.

- The concept of having a consolidated timetable and single, multi-modal (bus and rail) ticket for an entire trip is very appealing. This can be compared with the single roundtrip airline ticket itinerary that shows all departure and arrival times for the main flights as well as connecting flights.
- Some non-users feel a short trip on the train might be a beneficial addition to one-daily travel routine; others are concerned that a short trip at midday would take too long. The prospect of paying only \$1.00 per stop serves to motivate those who otherwise would not consider a short train trip. It was viewed as a very good idea – reasonably priced and very easy to understand.
- Non-riders would take the train to the Staples Center, San Diego, and Anaheim. The major constraints are price, fear of being stranded, and a feeling there would not be adequate connections.
- There would be interest among non-users in using the train to travel from Orange County to a place in north San Diego County (e.g. Tustin to Carlsbad Village) but the time commitment by train is viewed as a major obstacle. Given that the drive time is 1 hour, some non-user participants do not wish to exceed 1.5 to 2 hours by train; others expect the train to compete directly with the automobile.
- Non-rider focus group participants stated that young people might be interested in riding the train – especially college age students. In addition, they stated children are likely to be future train riders because it is possible to educate them to use transit in their daily lives.
- Non-rider focus group participants feel that the most important service features of the train or those features that should be enhanced are as follows: a consolidated LOSSAN website and timetable that integrates train system schedules, the \$1.00 per stop fare concept, and the single ticket for the entire trip. They also favor on-board information.
- Non-user participants view freeway signs that show train information as unimportant to them because they would rarely use the freeway to get to the stations.

Lessons Learned

Below are lessons learned from this focus group research. Most interesting was information gleaned from non-rider groups who at first viewed transit as for someone else. There was much anxiety about using the train. However, resistance diminished when concepts of simplifying the system, providing easy to understand tariffs, and providing better schedule and connecting route information were discussed. In addition, the following observations were made.

1. We need to make the service easier to use.

Both riders and non-rider focus group participants like the concept of integrating services on the LOSSAN corridor so it is easy to use. This includes schedules, fares, and system information.

Added efforts should be made to enhance communications – at the stations (preferably with agents on site at major stations), on the train, and on the internet. In particular, regular riders think accident and incident data needs to be readily available so they can make a decision about whether to stick with the train or use another commute option. They want to be able to “opt in” to a program where accident/incident/schedule information can be pushed directly to their cell phone in real time.

2. The train is initially viewed as a long-distance travel option.

When first discussing LOSSAN corridor travel, focus group participants perceived the train as a modal option for long trips. Regular riders think about their existing commute trip. Non-riders think of the train in terms of trips to Los Angeles or San Diego or Santa Barbara. Subsequently, the notion of using trains that operate on the LOSSAN corridor for short trips is new to both groups. This indicates a need for a comprehensive public education program when service expands along the corridor. The idea to offer a simple, low fare for short distances was well received and participants felt it could be useful in attracting riders.

3. Pricing matters.

For non-riders, train fares are perceived as expensive. Some recall experiences trying to take family members on a trip. They report the car turned out to be a much less expensive option. To attract new riders, pricing must be a strong consideration. Promotional fares, tie-ins with

recreational or sporting events, and the \$1.00 per station fare seemed appealing in this regard.

4. Promotional tie-ins might attract new riders.

In discussions with all groups, the idea of being able to take the train to sporting events or entertainment venues was well received. This was to avoid parking prices and traffic congestion. Special “fan trains” were cited in other markets as being something to consider here. One point underscored by participants was there needs to be certainty that there will be a train for the return trip and convenient connections. Current schedules are viewed by both train and non-train focus group participants as restrictive.

5. A range of market segments should be assessed to determine their potential. Existing customers, people who live / work near stations, youth, and other markets should be assessed to determine their potential for ridership.

Next Steps

Based on the focus group findings, it is evident OCTA needs to continue to work with partner agencies to make services more convenient for customers and potential customers is a good one. It will be especially important to focus on schedule integration, trip planning, and connector services. Support for the development of communication systems that can disseminate real-time passenger information will also be important. This includes enhanced information at stations, better station signage, and website and cell phone communication systems.

In addition, it was clear in the discussion with the non-rider focus group participants that there was a general feeling of anxiety and a lack of awareness of how to use services and even a resistance to trying them. Marketing programs that create awareness of how to use the system – station and destination locations, ticketing, costs, connection information, etc. would be useful.

One way to address resistance to trying the train might be to develop more cooperative marketing programs. Collaborating with event venues that focus on specific trips might break down some barriers to using the train. With these trips, people can sample the train in a more relaxed environment with very specific trip information. As more service is added, destination programs (including short trip opportunities) might warrant special promotion.

Currently, staff is developing a scope of work for rail transit marketing services; findings from the focus group research will be helpful in this effort. Action on this procurement is scheduled for review by the Board of Directors before the end of the calendar year.

Also, OCTA had planned to conduct complementary quantitative research (on-board survey) to probe existing riders about unanswered questions from the focus group research. However, it is recommended that resources for this effort be redirected to further gather information from non-rider market segments where questions remain. These questions include:

- Are people aware of LOSSAN corridor services, expansion plans or trip options?
- What is the best way to build awareness and ridership?
- Who are the primary and secondary market segments?
- What are barriers to use of the train and how can we address them?
- What are the most appealing trip purposes – work, entertainment, recreational, shopping?
- What service features would attract new users? Do they differ from focus group findings?
- How can we attract riders for both long and short trips?
- What connecting services are valued – bus, auto, taxi, other?

Summary

OCTA is working to identify opportunities to integrate rail transit service along the LOSSAN corridor. Focus group discussions are complete providing insight on how to improve the customer experience, build the transit market, and improve rail ridership. Findings from this effort will be integrated into the Comprehensive Strategic Assessment of the LOSSAN Corridor underway now; information will be shared with other counties.

Attachments

None.

Prepared & Approved by:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ellen S. Burton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Ellen" and last name "Burton" clearly distinguishable.

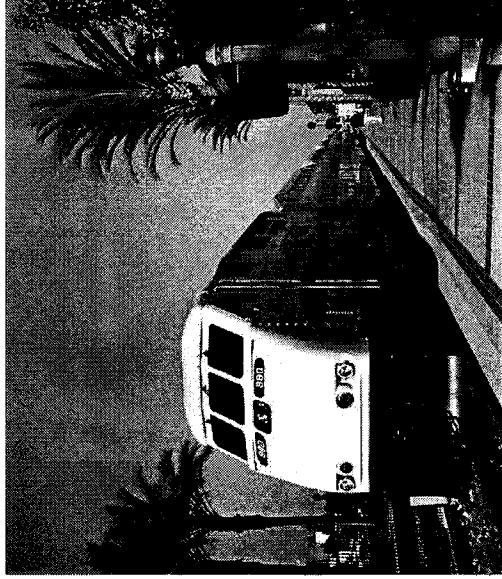
Ellen S. Burton
Executive Director, External Affairs
(714) 560-5923

PowerPoint Presentation

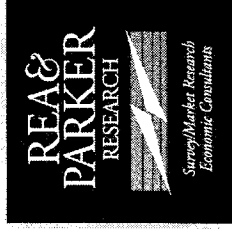
Attached

Los Angeles–San Diego Corridor Rail Service Integration

Focus Groups

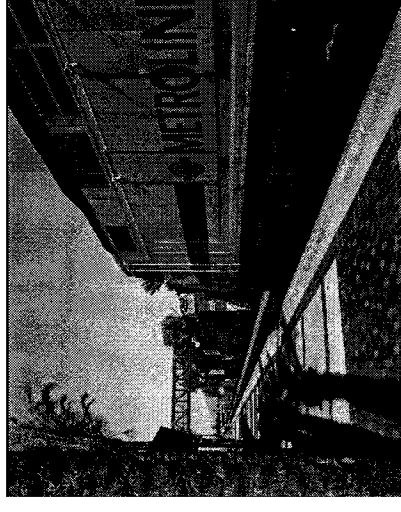


August 2008



Goals

- Identify service improvements
- Determine best communication methods
- Assess perceptions about:
 - Scheduling
 - Ticketing, fares
 - Connections
 - Station, on-board amenities
- Identify new ridership opportunities



Methodology

- 2 rider groups

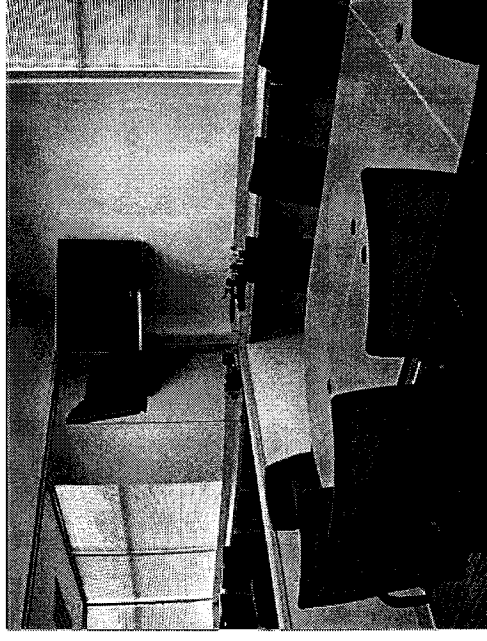
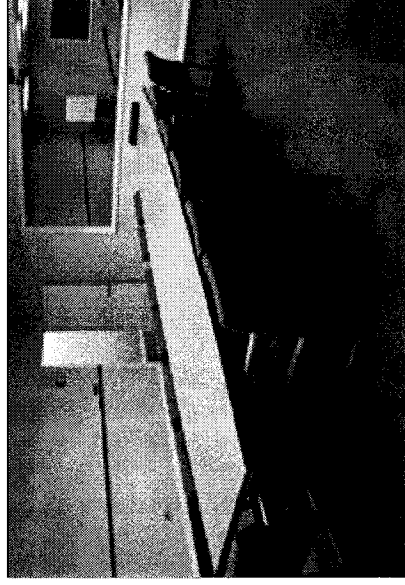
North Orange County trip origins

South Orange County trip origins

- 2 non-rider groups

Some transit experience

Little or no transit experience



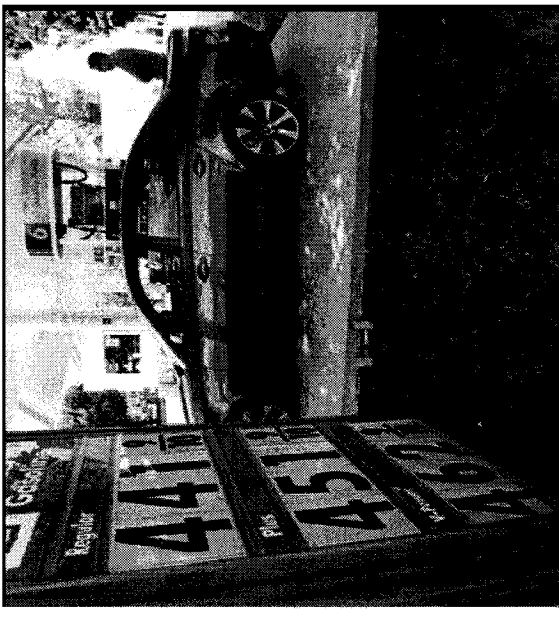
Riders

- Less stressful, relaxing, saves money
- View Amtrak, Metrolink as interchangeable
- Want earlier, later weekday trains
- Don't ride much off-peak or weekends
- Report trains are crowded
- Need more parking / feeders



Non-Riders

- Minimal awareness of trains
- Lack confidence, some anxiety
 - Question service availability, reliability
 - Fear being stranded
 - Not enough parking
 - Safety concerns
- Other systems better
- Train expensive (especially for family trips)



Most Appealing

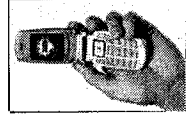
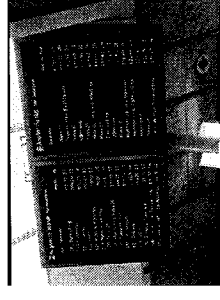
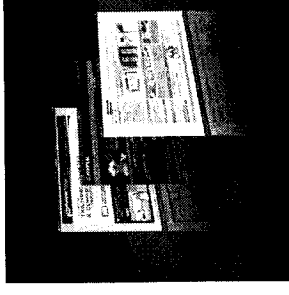
- Consistently positive feedback about:

Consolidated schedules, website

Electronic, real-time information

- Schedules
- Travel, delay information*

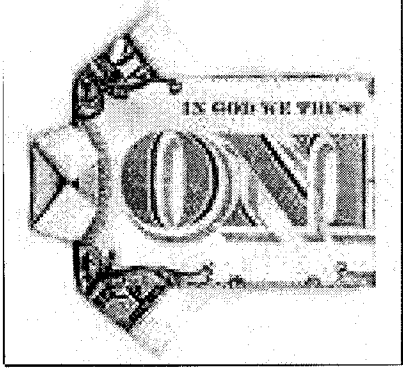
On-board information



- Riders want schedule info - causes of delay – accident, incident, switching problem? (push to cell phone)

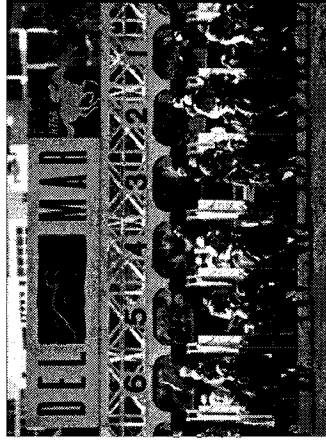
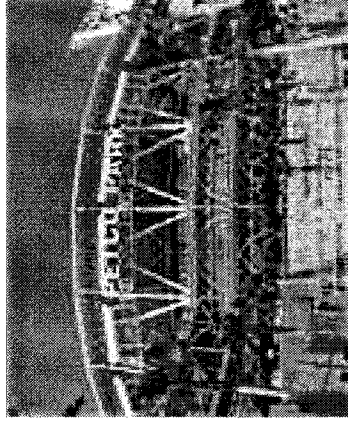
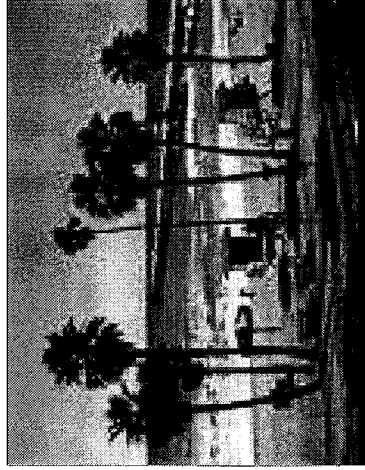
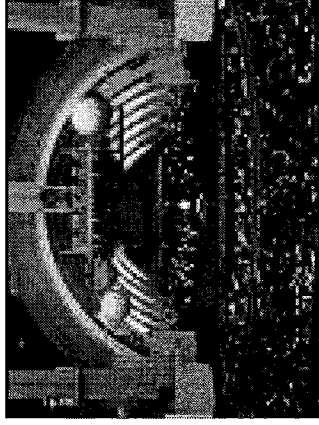
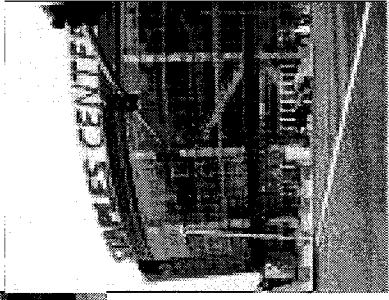
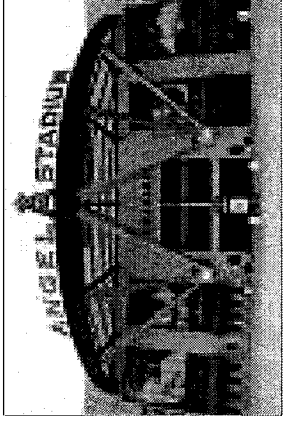
Other Feedback

- Most participants favored:
 - \$1.00 per stop - incentive to ride
 - Single trip ticketing – including bus, rail
- Not as important:
 - Freeway signs with train info



Where They'd Travel

- Los Angeles – Staples, Hollywood Bowl
- Anaheim - Angel Stadium, Disneyland
- San Diego – Petco Park
- Del Mar
- Santa Barbara
- Irvine Spectrum
- Beach



Noted Ridership Opportunities

- Existing riders, new trips
- Employers near stations

Could offer incentives through ridesharing programs

- Youth

College age: impacted by gas prices



Lessons Learned

1. Non-riders expressed anxiety about using train.

- Need to make service easier to use
- More service, better connections
- Need better communications

Consolidated schedules

Web based

More info at station, on trains

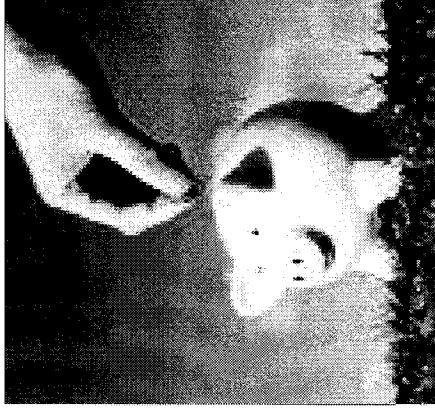
Real-time

Agents at major stations

	TIME	TRK	STATUS
209 METROLINK-VEGAS	1:50P	6B	ON TIME
578 SURFLINER-SAN DIEGO	2:00P	9B	BOARDING
310 METROLINK-SAN BERN	2:25P	7B	ON TIME
684 METROLINK-LENA MT	2:25P	8B	ON TIME
422 TEXAS EAGLE	2:30P		ON TIME
02 SUNSET LIMITED	2:30P		ON TIME
8536 LAS VEGAS BUS	2:45P		ON TIME
5702 LONG BEACH BUS	2:45P		ON TIME
5703 SURFLINER NORTH	2:55P		ON TIME
5703 BAKERSFIELD BUS	3:00P		ON TIME
5803 METROLINK-BUR AIR	3:05P	6B	ON TIME
5803 BAKERSFIELD BUS	3:10P		ON TIME

Lessons Learned

2. Train is initially viewed as long distance option
 - Public education needed
3. Pricing matters
 - Key in decision-making
 - \$1.00 fare per station reasonable



Lessons Learned

4. Promotional tie-ins might attract riders
 - “Fan train” concept well-received
 - Need to know you can get home
5. Further assessment of potential markets beneficial



Next Steps

- Work with partners to make service improvements
- Develop marketing to build ridership

Pursue promotional tie-ins to stimulate trial

Create awareness, education programs

Include “short trip” element

- Test short-distance fares
- Redirect quantitative research efforts

