

COMMUNITY VOICES

Use SA River For PRT

Light rail? Hardly!

By ROY REYNOLDS

Guest Columnist

While Orange County endures ever more traffic with very limited options to add more pavement, transportation planners have long coveted the Santa Ana River as a natural transportation corridor. And why not, it runs from Pacific Coast Highway through the "Central Core," across the densest population and employment concentrations in the county. It also touches the Anaheim Metrolink Station, crosses the Pacific Electric right-of-way and runs adjacent to Anaheim's planned ARTIC regional transit hub where the Metrolink and Amtrak may be relocated.

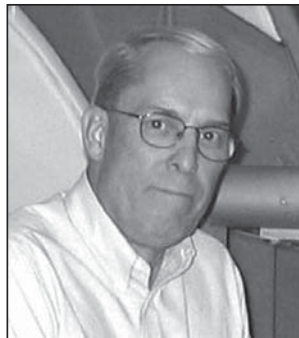
As late as last year, the Orange County Transportation Authority was discussing the extension of the 57 Freeway south, to have been elevated above the River. The OCTA will not consider this to PCH, but an extension to the 405 is still occasionally reviewed even though a Fountain Valley councilmember last year threatened the Authority with no support from the city for Measure M's renewal if any reference was made during its campaign to extending the freeway down the River—and none was.

The Santa Ana River has proven a very useful concrete-lined ditch, mostly controlled by the county's flood control department and the Army Corps of Engineers. Its engineering prevented many a flood back when it actually rained in Southern California. It's also home to a brine pipe for moving sea water, and bike paths, which are part of the OCTA's county-wide on and off road network.

The River could be used for transit, but a more reasonable approach than extending an elevated freeway needs consideration. Light rail? Hardly! Another CenterLine would be welcomed with the same outcry and community resistance as before. Light rail is an economic albatross and will never prove practical in our suburban environment; it's also redundant, competing with an award-winning bus system.

Personal Rapid Transit is a viable option. PRT, a lightweight, elevated monorail system, which supports small two to three person electric vehicles, could easily share the River's edges with the bike paths and traverse cross streets above street traffic. PRT isn't designed as a "line haul" system. Rather, it's built in series of loops which form a network, much like the design of the Internet. Vehicles, like Internet packets, are driverless, and directed by redundant wireless computer systems to take a rider directly to a requested destination, without stopping at any stations along the way or needing to share the ride with others.

The Santa Ana River edge is a perfect route for future PRT passengers, intersecting major arterial streets and freeways where it could be extended along shoulders and in medians to reach, for example, John Wayne Airport and South Coast Plaza. The River also provides a made-to-order connection between the County's two biggest tourist draws: the Anaheim Resort with 25 million tourists and conventioners annually, and the sand, downtown and pier attractions at Huntington Beach, which draw 11-12 million visitors each year. Newport Beach is also a strong tourist draw and, as HB, would benefit from an inexpensive and fast



way to exchange them travelers between the beach and the Anaheim Resort.

The city of Anaheim expects high-speed rail connections will support their ARTIC development, but that funding appears to be a low priority with the Schwarzenegger administration, especially if a needed bond issue doesn't make the 2008 ballot. It's also unlikely that any high-speed connection between Anaheim and Las Vegas would survive the resistance of contribution-happy Indian Casino interests.

Tucked into ARTIC and extended along the River, PRT would not only provide the tourist connection between Disneyland and the Anaheim Resort to Huntington and Newport Beach, it could also be run north along the 57 Freeway or east in the 91 Corridor to create a fast and convenient connection to Ontario Airport. An inexpensive, quick link to Ontario has long been high on Anaheim Mayor Pringle's wish list, and as well creates a way to better utilize a 24/7 international airport and take pressure off John Wayne. Arrivals and departures at SNA exceed ONT by about three million passengers annually.

Any active uses of the River for transit will be met with NIMBY resistance, but consider that PRT is far less impactful than either a freeway extension or light rail. PRT vehicles emit nothing, drawing power from the electric grid or even on-track solar cells. Small electric PRT vehicles are practically noiseless as well, and run without lights at night.

PRT's very small footprint, simply a pylon in the ground, means it can be extended to more useful places than other systems; for example, through flood channels to Huntington Beach's downtown area, Hyatt and Hilton Hotels and the new Pacific City and Strand developments. Also important, there are NO homes in Huntington Beach which back to the River. Southern California Edison transmission lines occupy most of the area alongside the River which is now planned for park space. Fountain Valley also has no homes along the River, and Costa Mesa's few dozen can be avoided by simply using the opposite river edge.

It's time to reasonably consider how to use the Santa Ana River as an asset and make progress in transit with a modern, electrified, emission-free PRT system.

Roy Reynolds is managing director of PRT Systems out of Fountain Valley. His firm's website offers more information on Personal Rapid Transit and Orange County-specific strategies at www.prtstrategies.com.

The Orange Coast Voice welcomes submissions to Community Voices by residents of Costa Mesa and Huntington Beach. All submissions should be well researched with a maximum of 800 words and accompanied by your full name, address and phone number for verification purposes. Send to admin@ocvoice.com.

Finding The Real Surf City

By JOE SHAW

OC Voice Columnist

On my nightly walk through downtown, I recently overheard two residents talking about Surf City Nights. "Yeah the music was really good," the man said to his neighbor across the street, "I've got to get down there again."

People are talking about what's been going on downtown on Tuesdays. Live music, street performers, a farmer's market, activities for the kids, specials from our downtown restaurants and sidewalk sales from our downtown retailers have all created a downtown buzz.

By all accounts, Surf City Nights is an astounding success. Business is thriving and residents are bringing their families downtown for the first time in years. In fact, it's as if the entire city had been waiting for this moment: a reason to come downtown again.

What's more, the city and downtown merchants have succeeded in producing what many cities would give anything for: a week night event drawing thousands to the urban core of the city, an event with true community spirit.

The Project for Public Spaces says that "small steps to enliven streets, parks, and other public spaces are the building blocks of a thriving city." Surf City Nights is the first small step we've taken toward making downtown Huntington Beach the kind of thriving community space residents and merchants want.

That's why it's necessary to keep it going. This event could trigger a turning point for a downtown critics have branded as a place merely to "booze and cruise."

I'm hoping that city leaders and merchants will realize the significance of what they've created and look for ways to build upon this success and to explore more ways to enliven HB's urban core.

Residents for years have said they'd like to see Main Street closed and many see the success of Surf City Nights as proof that it would work. Others like myself, believe we have merely proved that a well-planned event will bring residents downtown. The trick is getting more people downtown the rest of the time.

The city's Economic Development department has recently hired urban design firms to come up with new ideas on how our downtown should look and to revisit our downtown parking plan.

To that end, I've been doing a lot of thinking about downtown, a lot of walking, looking at our downtown and how we can make it more pedestrian friendly.

By the time you read this, I'll be on a long-awaited much-needed vacation to Europe and I plan to use some of my time there to look at European town centers, transit hubs, public spaces and parks to see if what's working there can work here. I'll be reporting back here in the next two issues as well as periodic updates on my website, www.greetings-fromhb.com.

A few weeks ago I traveled to the far away burgh of Rancho Cucamonga to visit a highly recommended and award-winning development there.

Victoria Gardens won an Urban Land Institute (ULI) award for basically creating a downtown shopping area



where there was none! I was amazed at this development for its vision and scope. You could be fooled into thinking this was once Rancho Cucamonga's downtown area, but the developers simply recreated the look, feel and scope of an old fashioned downtown area.

Consisting of a 4-5 block size area, shops, plazas, street parking and even a town square make up this remarkable development.

The ULI wrote: "To create a sense of place, the project's back story explains how the community grew over time from a simple group of buildings along a farm road to a diverse main street locale. Four architectural firms were engaged to design buildings representing various historical periods. Some buildings were designed to look as if they had been converted from other uses to serve today's needs; others appear to be several small shops stacked next to each other. The result is a tapestry of structures, streetscapes, and landscaping that reflects the history of Rancho Cucamonga."

Which got me thinking. The most attractive, original and popular part of Huntington Beach's downtown is the north side of the second block where the Sugar Shack, Longboard and No Ka Oi are. And not

surprisingly, these are actually some of downtown's few remaining historical structures.

Wouldn't it be great if the massive building housing the parking structure that's across the street from these historic structures had utilized false old store fronts reflecting the old Surf City facades much like Victoria Gardens did?

That's the kind of vision and innovative thinking that our city's planners, leaders and developers should use when deciding the future of our downtown. As the Victoria Gardens development shows, progress sometimes means looking backwards.

As we move forward with the two upcoming new developments we have some difficult questions to ask. Is it too late to recreate that old beach town feeling? Which is the real Surf City: the old downtown storefront and the beach bungalows remaining in our downtown neighborhoods or the Mediterranean developments and McMansions?

As we take another look at downtown, these are the questions that need to be answered.

Joe Shaw authors his own blog, "Greetings from Downtown Huntington Beach" at <http://hbdowntown.typepad.com/> and writes for the blog, Orange Juice, at <http://o-juice.blogspot.com/>.



Victoria Gardens

structures, streetscapes,

and landscaping that

reflects the history of

Rancho Cucamonga."

Which got me

thinking. The most

attractive, original and

popular part of

Huntington Beach's

downtown is the north

side of the second

block where the

Sugar Shack,

Longboard and

No Ka Oi are. And

not

surprisingly, these

are actually some

of downtown's few

remaining historical

structures.

Wouldn't it be

great if the massive

building housing the

parking structure

that's across the

street from these

historic

structures had

utilized false

old store

fronts reflecting

the old Surf City

facades

much like

Victoria Gardens

did?

That's the kind

of vision and

innovative

thinking that

our city's

planners,

leaders and

developers

should use

when

deciding the

future of our

downtown.

As the

Victoria

Gardens

development

shows,

progress

sometimes

means

looking

backwards.

As

we

move

forward

with

the

two

upcoming

new

developments

we

have

some

difficult

questions

to

ask.

Is

it

too

late

to

recreate

that

old

beach

town

feeling?

Which

is

the

real

Surf

City:

the

old

downtown

storefront

and

the

beach

bungalows

remaining

in

our

downtown

neighborhoods

or

the

Mediterranean

developments

and

McMansions?

As

we

take

another

look

at

downtown,

these

are

the

questions

that

need

to

be

answered.

Joe

Shaw

authors

his

own

blog,

"Greetings

from

Downtown

Huntington

Beach"

at

<http://hbdowntown.typepad.com/>

and

writes

for

the

blog,

Orange

Juice,

at

<http://o-juice.blogspot.com/>.