

Experts Differ on Usefulness of Monorail for Los Angeles

Rail System Favored by Top Planner

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Can monorail provide the magic formula that will help the Los Angeles area solve its rapid transit problems?

An expert in the municipal bond field believes it might offer a solution. He feels it's worth looking into.

But the city's top planner says Los Angeles should steer clear of monorail and concentrate on a standard rail system, the type of commuter-tested network proposed by the Metropolitan Transit Authority.

Both experts, keenly aware of the need for a workable rapid transit system here, gave these different views after taking a close look at the 1.2-mile Alweg monorail still operating in downtown Seattle.

Financing Offer Due

Attention here has swung again to the Seattle installation as a sample of what Los Angeles can expect if this region gets a monorail system.

Once discounted by the MTA, Alweg's monorail plan has generated new interest, and will be presented in a revised package, including an offer to finance and build a 42-mile system, June 4. The Seattle monorail is, of course, a nostalgic holdover from last year's World's Fair. Nearly 7.5 million passengers who rode it during the fair helped pay it off. It's now a familiar fixture along 5th Ave.

It will remain there, at least until next October, hauling passengers between the downtown station and Seattle Center, the fair grounds site turned into a cultural and entertainment center.

Sees Drawbacks

With the rapid transit situation—and Alweg's presentation—in mind, James L. Beebe, attorney and municipal bond expert, led six members of a Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce study committee to Seattle the other day.

All belong to Beebe's state and local government committee which will be asked to pass on any rapid transit financing plan, whether it comes from Alweg or some other group.

John E. Roberts, Los Angeles city planning director, also spent several days in Seattle attending the National Planning Conference sponsored by the American Society of Planning Officials.

Like Roberts, virtually every one of the hundreds of planners, many representing cities and metropolitan areas with transit problems as grave as Los Angeles', took time out to ride and inspect the monorail.

Roberts wasn't impressed. "Seattle's monorail car-

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ried millions of people on a straight line — from one point to another during the fair," he says, "but I still have to be shown that a system like this can carry masses of commuters. What about the switching operation? What about storage during off hours?"

He feels the MTA is on the right track in proposing a standard surface system with a portion of its so-called "backbone" in a subway under Wilshire Blvd.

The MTA's latest plan, stalled by an acceptable financing proposal, calls for a 58-mile system costing \$649 million.

Roberts believes the system could be built in segments, very much like the freeway network.

Beebe, speaking for himself and not necessarily his committee, says he found the Seattle monorail, its concrete beam ways and slender pylons much less an eyesore than he had expected.

Liked by Businessmen

Seattle's downtown businessmen, for the most part, like it and have come to regard it as "an accepted mode of transportation."

"People are riding it, they like to ride it," he explained. "It's not used for commuter traffic, of course. But it was built cheaply—\$4.25 million compared to \$10 million or more a mile for a subway and other systems.

"Transit is a losing proposition. When you can insure your losses with something like this, it's worth looking into."

Is monorail practical for the tremendous commuter loads such a system would be required to carry in Los Angeles?

Possible Solution

"Monorail is certainly a possible solution," Beebe says. "Assuming that the Alweg people make a financially sound proposal, we would be sidestepping our duty if we didn't give it careful, serious consideration."

Generally, Seattle's monorail seems to have gained enviable acceptance for an installation so often compared to New York's old elevated trains.

A survey was conducted by the University of Washington under a special grant from the Federal Housing and Home Finance Agency.

This study covered public acceptance, rider comparisons with busses, elevated trains and automobiles and other transit-related data.

Preferred to Busses

It showed, for example, that 94.8% of the riders preferred monorail to busses.

Significantly, from a businessman's point of view the monorail fared exceptionally well. The study found that of the 98 businessmen along the route who responded 78% considered the trains attractive and 34% felt the same way about the beamway.

Thirty-five per cent were indifferent to the beamway's appearance and 27% found it "rather" or "very" unattractive.

Seattle, meanwhile, still has not decided definitely whether the monorail will remain beyond next October.

Alweg is operating it under a franchise with the city. But diligent efforts are under way to bring it into the city's public transportation system.