



More Lanes on the 710 Means More Trucks: More Trucks Means More Pollution, Get it Caltrans?


By Roger Rudick | Apr 7, 2015 | 2 COMMENTS



L.A.'s Pacific Electric trains delivered freight in their day. Photo via Metro Library

The Arts District of downtown Los Angeles is now a vibrant residential community. But the signs of its warehouse past are everywhere. Abandoned railroad spurs, peeking up from the asphalt and running down old brick streets, speak volumes about bad public policies and metrics that, even as LA struggles to rebuild its once-great transit system, persist in too much of its bureaucracy. That's exemplified in two 710 freeway studies released by Caltrans and Metro.

The study for the northern section came out in March and looked at the "gap closure" from Alhambra to Pasadena, where the 710 would join the 210. The study for the southern section was released in June 2012 and looks at widening and double-decking the segment that runs 20 miles from the ports to the Pomona Freeway south of downtown. This chunk is mostly about freight and would cost around \$8 billion. Together, the environmental studies cost millions and number 2300 pages, with over 26,000 pages of supporting documents.

 [The Interstate Highway System changed the economics of trucks vs. trains for local delivery. Truck trailers now park on abandoned rail spurs in downtown L.A. Photo: Roger Ruddick](#)

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downtown LA.

So what killed local rail freight delivery? “It was the Interstate Highway System,” explained Don Norton, a spokesman for the Pacific Harbor Line, a railroad that assembles long-distance freight trains full of containers offloaded from cargo ships. “But railroads still compete on cargo that’s heavy, bulky, and traveling extremely long distances.”

Railroads have to maintain their own infrastructure—meaning thousands of miles of tracks, switches, spurs, bridges, signals, yards, etc. So they focus on their long-distance mainlines where they get the most bang for the buck. Trucking companies, on the other hand, get an all-but free ride on roads built by state and local governments. They also [cause a disproportionate amount of damage](#).

As a result, when cargo comes off a ship in Los Angeles, if it’s staying in the region or going no farther than Nevada or Arizona, trucks cost less. If it’s going to Memphis, Chicago or anyplace east of the Rockies, or around 550 miles or more, it’s more cost-effective to combine the shipments onto a single freight train—often more than a mile in length—rather than paying some 300 truck drivers to do the same job. Some long distance trains are put together right on the docks. Others are assembled in what’s called “near dock” yards—trucks scoot containers from ships to rail yards a few miles away, where they are transferred onto those giant freight trains.

But today’s largest ships carry 19,000 containers. There isn’t enough area near the docks to handle it all. So over 800 trucks a day use the 710 and other connecting roads to get to giant rail yards in Commerce.

The situation was worse before the Alameda Corridor, a dedicated, 20-mile freight train “expressway,” with a three-track

Most people know that Los Angeles had a comprehensive mass transit system, the Pacific Electric. But the Pacific Electric, along with other railroads of Southern California, also delivered freight. All the building materials and manufactured goods that made the economy of Los Angeles was once delivered on local rail spurs directly to warehouses, many of them in



 [Alameda Corridor freight rail. Photo by Roger Ruddick](#)

Alameda Corridor freight rail. Photo by Roger Rudick

mainline, roughly paralleling the 710. Completed in 2002, it greatly improved the connection between the ports to the rest of the national rail system. The Alameda Corridor handles about 45 trains a day, helping them get back and forth to the docks quickly. Each train carries the cargo equivalent of 250 to 300 trucks, explained John Doherty, chief officer of the authority that operates the Alameda Corridor. It would take over 11,000 trucks, every day, to do the job of these trains. But the Corridor is operating at 36 percent capacity, he explained. It could handle 105 more trains every day, or the equivalent of another 26,000 trucks.



Policy makers have a choice: add more lanes to the 710 or figure out how to get more stuff onto trains.

And that's where Caltrans fails. The most glaring omission in both studies, but with the 710 South especially, is a failure to consider induced demand. A source at one of the transportation agencies, who spoke on condition of anonymity, admitted that they didn't look at it—a least, “not explicitly.” *Wired Magazine* did an [excellent primer on the concept](#). Think of the [latest 405 widening](#) — despite what LA's planners think, widening freeways doesn't reduce congestion. Furthermore, [trucks burn as much as ten times more energy per ton of cargo than trains](#). So if the mission is to improve air quality, reduce greenhouse gases, and facilitate more goods movement from the ports, why not push more stuff onto the Alameda Corridor, rather than inducing more truck traffic by double decking the 710?

There are projects in the works. Take the Southern California International Gateway (SCIG), a planned near-dock yard near the Dominguez channel, right on the Corridor. The \$500 million project, which would be funded by the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway (BNSF), was approved by the Los Angeles City Council two years ago, but construction of the yard, which is four miles from the docks, has [stopped due to a lawsuit](#).

The project includes \$100 million for low emission and no-emission trucks and trains. However, “We're opposed to SCIG in all shapes and fashions,” said Mark Lopez, a representative with East Yard Communities for Environmental Justice and a party to the lawsuit. “We believe they can handle the freight on the dock.” Lopez and others argue the yard will exacerbate traffic jams and pollution from trucks delivering containers to the Union Pacific Railroad's near-dock yard, the Intermodal Container Transfer Facility, which is next to the planned SCIG location.

However, the solutions of environmental groups seem oddly self defeating. While they oppose SCIG, they accept the idea of truck lanes that “would travel along the existing 710



footprint and not displace homes and jobs—in the center of the freeway but elevated,” said Lopez. They were sold on it in part because of a stipulation that the elevated lanes have the ability to handle zero-emissions trucks: alternative 6B and 6C would put catenary electrification wires (similar to what you see over a Light Rail line, but with two sets of wire) over the lanes for new dual-mode trucks that shut off their diesel engines and run on electric during the 20-mile drive down the new lanes of the 710. *(This paragraph updated 4/8.)*



Siemens has a [prototype electric truck that they are currently testing](#), but that’s it. It’s unclear who would pay for these new trucks or if they would be reliable, economical and safe. The EIR estimates electric trucks would reduce overall diesel fuel consumption by only 6 to 8 percent. Rather than including this as an option in the EIR, one has to wonder why Caltrans wouldn’t first try it on a shorter run, for example, by installing the catenary on the existing four-mile corridor from the ports to Union Pacific’s Intermodal Container Transfer Facility.

And if zero emissions is the goal, why did Caltrans toss out electrification of the rail lines, which requires no new technology? The National Resources Defense Council did a [great piece about how the Russians electrified the Transiberian railroad](#), which is over 5,000 miles long, back in 1929. Rail electrification is the norm in Europe. In the US, of course, one only has to look at the Northeast Corridor from Boston to Washington, DC. Or the [Black Mesa and Lake Powell Railroad](#), a short freight rail line in Northern Arizona. And the Pacific Electric used to run electrified freight trains right here in Los Angeles.

Either way, the Alameda Corridor could be used for shuttle trains that would move cargo containers between the inland long-distance train assembly areas and the ports, as is now done by truck. In fact, the Caltrans study concludes that moving goods by rail would “markedly reduce heavy-duty truck traffic on the I-710.” But “...the Enhanced Good Movement by Rail component was removed...because these projects and other efforts to maximize the amount of goods movement by rail would not be completed as part of the I-710 Corridor Project.” The source at Caltrans confirmed what the EIR seems to say: rail enhancements were nixed simply because they’re not physically on the 710. Doherty said shuttle trains are occasionally discussed but they would require subsidies to be economical.

There are other question marks. The Russian government has approved a \$66 billion project to build a rail tunnel under the Bering Strait. The Chinese are talking along the same lines. If they succeed, West Coast ports may become redundant. Additionally, electrified trains, depending how the power is produced, can be carbon-free. As one transportation expert



with rail and nautical expertise put it, even without the tunnel, there’s going to be pressure to increase rail and seaward capacity at northern ports closer to Asia, as a way of reducing greenhouse gas emissions from ships.



Either way, it seems strange that in the US, a country that stresses free markets, a state agency is so eager to provide free infrastructure for trucks. That’s why, as the Wired magazine piece points out, we have the equivalent of Soviet-style bread lines on our roads. It’s as if the Teamsters are telling Caltrans what to do.

It took the Soviet Union 70 years to realize this kind of economics doesn’t make sense. When will we?

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Marven Norman • 8 years ago

Wait, let me get this straight. For \$8 billion, we can deliver more trucks 20 miles. Or for \$9 billion, we can electrify the BNSF/UP mainlines all the way out to the Colton Crossing, which could even allow Metrolink to run EMUs on some lines. It's far past time to hold the agencies up to the task of being responsible. It's also apparent that they're looking at this particular project through the wrong lens, i.e. how do we move more trucks up this freeway vs. how do we move freight through here more efficiently.

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calwatch • 8 years ago

It should be noted that at the 710 North forum last week, MTA board member John Escano specifically stated that he would

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By Brian Addison | Feb 5, 2013

Long Beach City Council I-710 Oversight Committee, Gateway Council of Governments and The Project Committee all reject current environmental documents for 710 widening between Long Beach and East Los Angeles. Following thousands of comments from leaders within community health and environmental coalitions, the State-led project to expand the 710 Freeway from eight lanes to 14 lanes for [...]

The "Other" I-710 Project: Widening to Improve Air Quality in Long Beach

By Damien Newton | Jul 8, 2009



For the record, this is what a 14 lane highway looks like. Photo:pankaj/Picasa While environmentalists and smart growth advocates focus on the I-710 Tunnel Project, the one that would "complete" by closing the 4.5 mile gap between the current end of the freeway and the 210 Freeway; another massive expansion project for the I-170 is [...]



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By Mark Vallianatos | Apr 13, 2011

I have written about how amorphous the scoping process for Metro and Caltrans's 710 gap-closure/big dig project has been. I've now given shape to my own opinions in comments for the scoping phase of their environmental review (which ends on April 14th). Please submit comments if you are interested in the future of freeways [...]

Op/Ed: Freeway Expansion Is a Pill for Poor Health

By Dr. Roberta Kato | Sep 5, 2012

Dr. Roberta Kato, MD, is a Pediatric Pulmonologist at Children's Hospital Los Angeles and an Environmental Health Ambassador with Physicians for Social Responsibility-LA. As a Pediatric Pulmonologist, I'm concerned that Caltrans proposed expansion of the I-710 Corridor— from the Ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach to the Pomona Freeway—will negatively impact air quality in adjacent communities. Our children [...]

EIR Released for the "Other" 710 Project, Let's Get Ready to Widen

By Damien Newton | Jul 3, 2012

The I-710 is a marvel of 20th century transportation planning. The freeway, which is sometimes as large as ten lanes, connects both the ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles to Route 60, passing the I-405, SR-91, I-105, I-605, I-10, and SR-60 before heading North. Traffic is so congested north of SR-60, that some local [...]

Streetsblog Asks Metro Board to Waive Attorney Client-Privilege on Najarian's 710 Big Dig Motion

By Damien Newton | Aug 1, 2013

SBLA Metro 710 Privilege At last week's Metro Board meeting, County Attorney Charles Safer responded to an April motion by Board Member Ara Najarian containing questions on the I-710 Gap Closure Project. The Najarian motion sought the answers to three basic questions concerning the relationship between Caltrans and Metro on this project. Specifically, Najarian sought [...]

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