

## Ticket To Ride

### Transportation Experts Consider Alternatives To Automobiles

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**T**he ideas for alternative transportation models in Downtown Long Beach are as varied as the advocates who hope to solve what they consider to be infrastructure shortfalls. Name the mode and it's probably been pitched – streetcars, monorails, light rail, personal rapid transit, even gondolas.

Long Beach Transit (LBT), which formed in 1963, provides traditional buses, water taxis, the Passport and Dial-A-Lift for the disabled. President and CEO Larry Jackson, whose career with LBT spans 34 years, said proposals come and go.

“There have been a lot of different ideas,” Jackson said. “Historically, it’s been all talk.”

“There has to be the policy commitment to the community to find the resources to both build [and] maintain that system,” he said, noting funding is the greatest obstacle.

Jackson said monorail systems have limited applications and pose environmental issues because of elevated rails.

“They aren’t good for moving large volumes of people,” he said.

LBT, which once operated the double-decker buses that are popular in Europe, could bring back modern-style versions for the local area. Today, LBT buses transport 30 million people annually.

“That’s been a discussion that we’ve had in terms of the future for downtown,” Jackson said. “It’s all about the sizzle, the image and eye-catching appeal to the community.”

Besides what he called a “love affair” with the automobile, Jackson said Long Beach lacks the density of major cities such as Manhattan and San Francisco to justify the expenses of some proposed models. In addition, the city’s layout evolved around parking structures and cars, unlike in older countries where cities developed around public transportation.

“When we don’t develop our cities that way, it makes it very difficult for public transportation to work,” he said. “The good news for Long Beach is this city’s built out.”

Alex Bellehumeur, founder and president of State-Wide Developers Inc., has spent more than a decade trying to improve accessibility in downtown. He is also a former harbor commissioner.



Personal Rapid Transit Systems would allow people to travel nonstop to their destination. (Rendering Courtesy of PRT Strategies)

Though his previous idea fell to the wayside, today Bellehumeur is proposing two alternatives.

“It took me about two years to realize the feasibility of a monorail system couldn’t work,” he said, noting he then started researching Doppelmayr systems.

The Wave, a funicular system that runs without an onboard motor, would link key downtown destinations. The Surf rider, a gondola-type system, would bring passengers over the water from the Aquarium of the Pacific to the Queen Mary.

To accommodate potential development on the 45 acres around the Queen Mary, Bellehumeur said there would have to be adequate transportation, which would attract lenders and developers looking to transform the Queen Mary into a major destination.

“Do you add more buses?” he asked. “There’s already congestion, particularly in high season.”

Bellehumeur hopes to receive an exclusive negotiating agreement to build either the gondola or elevated, automated people mover, which he said operates at Mandalay Bay and Luxor Hotels in Las Vegas.

He won't disclose projected costs because of competition, but said The Wave's budget includes \$20 million for possible infrastructure improvements along the bridge.

Plans for The Wave went back on the shelf when the Queen Mary's leasehold changed hands again earlier this year. However, he said The Surfrider is possible regardless of whether the Queen Mary site is developed.

"Not only is it very feasible, but it saves \$25 million," Bellehumeur said, comparing it with The Wave. "The 'wow' factor is phenomenal."

He plans to meet with councilmembers and garner additional support to move the project forward, which would include entitlements, submitting for federal and state grants and preparing for development.

"I believe we could probably break ground within two years," he said of The Surfrider.

Another idea is personal rapid transit (PRT), a collector/distributor system that could connect the city's parking assets, destinations and even hotels.

Roy Reynolds, who represents PRT Strategies, called PRT "a horizontal elevator."

"A streetcar system or a monorail system is going to have a very limited number of stations," Reynolds said. "A PRT system, because the stations are built at an offline site, can [have] as many stations as feasible."

He explained that PRT would allow people to go directly from their point of origin to their destination without any stops along the way.

"A PRT system is direct and nonstop – you don't have to share the ride," Reynolds said, noting a similar system operates on the campus of West Virginia University.

Both Reynolds and Bellehumeur said companies could join the public-private partnership by sponsoring a station or paying to have one at their site.

Reynolds said PRT stations would be less intrusive than other models because they could be built into existing buildings or parking structures.

"We're small enough and diminutive enough that we could be engineered into the sides of structures," he said. "We're hoping to develop some interest in Long Beach."

"We've always said we could revitalize the Queen Mary if we could get people to and from it," he added, noting that the city seems generally disinterested in doing that.

Jackson said that new transportation to the Queen Mary and other destinations requires money.

"Every time they talk about it, there's no money to build it and no political will to maintain it," he said.

Meanwhile, Long Beach residents hoping to avoid congested freeways can ride the METRO Blue Line, which transports roughly 27 million passengers annually from Downtown Long Beach to various stops in Los Angeles.

Dana Coffey, general manager of Gateway Cities, said the Blue Line isn't expected to expand. Although ridership increases as gas prices rise, she said the greatest challenge in promoting public transportation is changing the culture.

"[People] don't want to release the freedom of operating their own vehicles," Coffey said.

## From "Old Town" to the Queen



The Wave, a cable-pulled light rail system, could transport passenger to various destinations in downtown. The Doppelmayr system operates at various locations in Las Vegas. (Rendering courtesy of State-Wide Developers)

With continued traffic problems, she said public transit will become the preferred way to travel in the future. In addition, METRO is filling gaps with additional links to make travel options easier for the public.

The regional connector project is one such project. The 1.8-mile connection will, using Measure R funds, join the Blue Line and the Gold Line in Downtown L.A. and eliminate a transfer.

For \$1.25, people can ride to one of 22 stops on the Blue Line. Coffey said it also benefits the environment to have fewer cars on the road.

To link buses with METRO stops, the company works with LBT. "There is service coordination between Long Beach Transit and METRO," Coffey said. "Traveling nowadays has to be planned." ■