

Column: About that mile walk to buses and trolleys ...

San Diego continues to plan for higher density housing that depends on more transit lines — and better ways to get to and from them

By Michael Smolens

Like much of urban California, San Diego's transportation system for decades has been stressed not just by the limited capacity of freeways, but the difficulty in even getting on them.

Residents who commute by car are familiar with the backups and waits at on-ramps during the ever-expanding rush "hour." The situation has improved over the years with metering and other advances in traffic management, but it hasn't gone away.

There's kind of a parallel problem facing planners as they map out a hoped-for future where more people turn to mass transit, both to ease congestion and help combat climate change.

Not only are more and speedier bus and trolley lines needed, but so is a strategy to get people to them.

For many years, one of the hurdles in shifting populations to transit has been the "first mile/last mile" problem — how people get to bus and trolley stops that aren't within convenient walking distance from homes, workplaces, schools or shopping areas.

That concern came into stark relief last week when a divided San Diego City Council voted to expand areas where taller, more dense housing can be built — along with additional backyard units. The underlying theory behind the move is that the region faces a shortage of affordable housing and increasing the housing stock will ease prices. Not everyone agrees a building boom — if one happens — will do the trick.

The previous requirement for properties to qualify for these higher densities was they had to be within a half mile of a transit line. The new policy makes that one mile.

The generally pro-housing, pro-transit nine-member Democratic council was split 5-4 in favor of the change, and there was an animated discussion about whether people would walk so far to catch a bus or trolley.

That was already a legitimate question even at a half mile, given the measurement was as the crow flies and the actual walking route may be hilly and not so direct. The difficulty in getting to a transit stop becomes more acute when navigated by people who have mobility difficulties, have small children or must carry shopping bags.

What's clear is for this kind of housing approach to work, there's going to have to be a comprehensive first mile/last mile approach that doesn't merely rely on people walking. Sure, some people will take the hike, but far from everyone.

That's going to require its own infrastructure of diverse ways to get people to transit stops.

This doesn't necessarily have to be the transit version of the home-run swing, the kind that's needed to create new trolley lines and stations. But even a little-ball effort on the beginning and ending of trips to make transit work needs to be a coordinated system.

It's not like this hasn't been happening elsewhere. For generations, people have been driving to, or getting dropped off at, train stations to head to work in cities, particularly in the East. Park-and-ride lots are hardly a new concept. This happens only sporadically in San Diego.

More options have come about but some didn't last. Car2go, once a promising fleet of little electric car rentals around the city, couldn't make it. App-based electric scooters and bike rentals have been spotty, and Uber and Lyft ridesharing — along with taxis — aren't economically feasible for a lot of folks on a regular basis.

Meanwhile, some businesses and the San Diego Association of Governments have been operating vanpools and shuttles.

Personal bicycles for the beginning and ending legs have potential for folks who don't want to ride all the way to work and back. But right now there's limited ability to take them on buses and trolleys, and bike lockers are pretty sparse. That shouldn't be hard to address.

There's also the idea of short-range individual automated vehicles being available someday, along with automated buses that mimic light rail. There's plenty of discussion about whether such transit — powered by clean energy and operating on managed “smart” roads — could be cheaper to build and more flexible to operate than rail systems.

That does not seem to be the direction of major transportation agencies, such as SANDAG, which continues to pursue a \$160 billion plan for the future that is centered on massive rail expansion.

That future appears uncertain. The SANDAG plan has been stuck in neutral, with questionable political support. Early efforts to finance it have failed or been abandoned.

SANDAG faces some unique, localized concerns. But mass transit everywhere may be approaching a reckoning with shrinking ridership and financial shortfalls — some of which are the result of the still-evolving trend of people working remotely.

The San Diego Metropolitan Transit System late last year reported that ridership has rebounded nearly to pre-pandemic levels. But as Joshua Emerson Smith of The San Diego Union-Tribune pointed out, ridership is still down sharply from last decade.

Other transportation systems in more transit-oriented cities such as New York and San Francisco have been hemorrhaging riders, while facing financial shortfalls that are leading to reductions in service.

The billions of dollars in federal COVID relief funds that propped up transportation agencies through the pandemic are dwindling. SDMTS hasn't spent as fast as some other agencies and as of December still had more than half of its \$360 million in COVID funds.

SDMTS said it could hold off on any major cuts at least through 2027, according to Smith.

Gov. Gavin Newsom, facing a growing budget deficit, is proposing cutting state transit funds.

That's just the immediate future. In the long run, there's a serious debate about whether mass transit is sustainable under its decades-old operating and financial models.

In San Diego, where housing of the future increasingly will be dependent on transit, that may be a bigger question than just what to do about the first and last mile.