
Some Bus Service Is Better Than None at All

OCTA proposed 2016 changes will hurt poor and disabled

By **Kat Avila** | Published on LatinoLA: February 1, 2016



I'm on the no. 53 bus going south on Main Street in Santa Ana, and I'm taking a light nap. Soon it is standing-room only. Sniff, sniff. Someone reeks of the streets and alcohol, a familiar smell, the perfume of the homeless. When my eyes flash open, I wonder why his balls have to be in front of my face. Either he will get off soon or I will, and then I can breathe a sigh of relief.

An elderly man sits on my left. He has a wheeled walker. His stop has come up. "Excuse me, excuse me," he continually apologizes as he struggles toward the closest back exit to get off. If he's lucky, the bus won't be parked too far from the curb. There are times I've had to leap the chasm with a heavy pack. The landing is very hard on the body.

An essential bus accessory is earplugs, because not everyone respects the "No Radios" sign on the bus. Mr. I'm-Too-Cool-for-Rules has decided to share his ghetto music. But I'll be getting off soon. I comfort myself with that thought. I pull the cord for my stop.

I run across the street to the next stop. I don't want to miss my transfer. About 20 minutes pass before the bus shows up, which is good. Sometimes you have to wait an hour.

But having some service is better than no service. Which is why I spoke at the public hearing at OCTA headquarters on January 25, 2016. There were 64 speakers from 24 cities. We represented ourselves and organizations. The deep cuts in South County where I live prompted me to quip that OCTA (Orange County Transportation Authority) should change its name to Central Orange County Bus Service.

I recognized a couple fellow speakers. One was an elderly Latina who travels from Santa Ana to South County to clean houses. A month earlier, I had signed her petition to raise awareness that the bus we were on would go poof under the proposed changes. Over a handful of Spanish-speaking housekeepers spoke at the hearing.

The other speaker I knew by face was a wheelchair-bound elderly white woman. The last bus we can take home leaves before 8 p.m. If you miss that bus because your connecting bus is late, then your only option is to walk home. Taking a taxi is too expensive.

It's an hour-and-a-half walk in the dark. I'm slow, so it takes me two hours. If you're in a wheelchair like her, you camp out at the bus stop until the following morning when the buses start running again.

The route we share is being cut in half so that students will not be able to get to Saddleback College and workers will not be able to connect to the Metrolink. Rather than concentrate service during morning and evening rush hours, OCTA would rather butcher the route and force everyone into cars because of "low ridership." There would be no weekend service.

Also in attendance were a large number of disabled speakers. The cutting of bus routes would mean losing ACCESS service. ACCESS is a shared-ride mini-bus that picks up the disabled at

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their front door. But there is a condition: "ACCESS service is provided within a 3/4 mile of, and during similar hours as, OCTA's regular fixed route service." This means that if you do not live within a 3/4 mile of an established bus route, then you cannot use ACCESS.

After the public hearing portion of the meeting, Gary Hewitt of OCTA seemed fairly dismissive when he cited a statistic that only 1.5% of ACCESS boardings occur in the affected areas. What he doesn't know is that many people who meet the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) eligibility criteria do not use ACCESS or the Same-Day Taxi Program. Those programs cost much more than taking the regular bus. And the disabled who ride the regular buses won't have ACCESS to fall back on when their routes are cut.

Anyone who regularly rides the bus in Southern California is generally on a limited income. They are the most vulnerable to the proposed changes.

A week earlier, I had sent an FYI email to my city council: "The people who ride the bus in South County tend to be service and retail workers, high school and college students, mothers with children, the elderly, special needs, and people who have fallen on hard times. Bus transportation in these cases is an important social service."

Organizations represented at the hearing included Transit Advocates of Orange County, Southern California Transit Advocates, trainweb.com, and even the Teamsters Union (for OCTA workers). Former California State Senator Lou Correa put in an appearance.

Reuben Franco, president of the Orange County Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, said he appreciated the difficulty of negotiating financially sustainable transportation. A representative from the local Vietnamese Chamber of Commerce spoke up for small businesses along affected bus routes.

OCTA has been touting a 92% statistic that leads people to believe there will be overall better bus service. OCTA's words are: "The majority of riders, 92 percent, will see improved bus service or no change in service." But Transit Advocates of Orange County countered that only 17% of riders will be truly benefiting from the loss of connectivity and regional coverage.

Community meetings were held in December 2015 in Orange, San Juan Capistrano, Laguna Hills, and Huntington Beach. Surprisingly, there was no community meeting in Santa Ana, which may boast the heaviest and most dedicated bus ridership of all cities in Orange County.

In the meantime, until the final plan is approved, maybe I better get used to the idea of riding a bike.

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