

THE ORANGE COUNTY
REGISTER

Orange County's streetcar boondoggle

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The Orange County Transportation Authority is proud that it has begun laying track for the OC Streetcar — a \$408-million, low-speed, 4.1-mile rail line that the agency boasts is “connecting our communities with tomorrow.” Unfortunately, a streetcar powered by overhead electric lines is not a transportation option of the future, but an old-school system that is unlikely to make a dent in traffic.

We're not against rail per se, but every transportation proposal needs to pass the basic cost-and-benefit smell test. The streetcar, which should be running by early 2023, will meander around Santa Ana and Garden Grove, connecting the Santa Ana Transit Center with the Civic Center and public-transportation hubs including Amtrak, Metrolink and OCTA bus stops.

Supporters envision the initial line as a starter segment for a countywide system, but it's hard to imagine that the boutique system will do much more than divert funds from fundamental improvements to the street and freeway systems that most people in Orange County depend upon.

At nearly \$100 million per mile, the OC Streetcar is unlikely to reduce congestion in a county with thousands of miles of roads and freeways. We agree with the libertarian Cato Institute's transportation expert Randal O'Toole, who notes that “streetcar technology is 130 years old and has since been replaced by less expensive, more flexible buses.” He views all streetcar projects as “boondoggles.”

OCTA officials could not have predicted the COVID-19 crisis, which has hammered transit ridership. But even before the pandemic, public-transportation ridership had fallen so precipitously that it was posing a crisis for most American cities, according to a 2018 Washington Post report.

Orange County's transit situation has been similarly bleak. Anaheim's 67,000 square-foot ARTIC (Anaheim Regional Transportation Intermodal Center) rises impressively above the 57 Freeway like an alien spaceship — but its ridership numbers are low even though it no longer is draining the city's budget.

County officials ought to prioritize cost-effective transportation-engineering projects such as roads and buses rather than social-engineering projects that attempt to change the way we get around.