

Opinion: How the San Diego region can build on new Mid-Coast Trolley

By Colin Parent · The San Diego Union-Tribune · 4 min

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Last month, San Diego opened the largest single transit investment in our region's history, the Mid-Coast Trolley. San Diego can make the most of the Mid-Coast with the right choices going forward.

The Mid-Coast extends the existing Blue Line Trolley from the San Ysidro border, through Downtown San Diego, and on to UC San Diego and its surrounding neighborhoods. For the first time, one of our region's largest employment centers is accessible by San Diego's iconic trolley.



Now, students have an easy, fast and free ride to all that San Diego has to offer.



This is not a matter of administrative priorities — it will all come down to support from the student body.



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Still, the Mid-Coast stations are not within convenient walking distance of most biotech jobs on the Torrey Mesa, or from the campuses of major employers like Illumina. San Diego's biotech sector, and its companion tech sector anchored by Qualcomm, are thriving. Unfortunately, their growth is hampered by traffic and long commute times.

For the Mid-Coast to be an attractive option for our technology sectors, the region must invest in frequent connecting buses, bus-only lanes and safe infrastructure for bicycles and micromobility.

Many workers will be happy to skip grueling congestion if they can confidently rely on a quick bus ride from their trolley stop to their workplace. Frequent bus service would mean little to no wait for a transfer. Bus-only lanes can keep buses and shuttles from being caught in street traffic. The tech folks will appreciate the math: Bus-only lanes can move far more passengers per hour than a lane shared with cars taking one traveler at a time.

Many San Diegans do not think of transit as a solution that can work for them. Convincing them otherwise requires delivering a better service. Lower fares will not convince many people to take transit because transit is already much cheaper than owning and operating a car.

Studies show again and again that higher frequencies and faster travel times are the major reasons people will switch to transit. When a transit connection is competitive with a car, many people will choose transit.

Fortunately, the city of San Diego is currently updating its University Community Plan, the land use and transportation blueprint for the area. The city controls the designs of its streets. If the city dedicates rights of way for bus-only lanes, they can help the region's transit planners run more frequent connector buses, with higher ridership.

Both the Metropolitan Transit System and the San Diego Association of Governments have made recent commitments to improving bus frequencies. More bus-only lanes and an opportunity to connect with the Mid-Coast will justify further expanding service. Service hours should also be expanded to serve the many research facilities operating 24 hours a day.

The University Community Plan presents an opportunity to build safe and protected bike lanes. Many workers would gladly take a bicycle or scooter for the last mile of their trolley trip, if the surrounding roads were safe for them.

Transit skeptics like to argue that few biotech CEOs or high-paid engineers are going to give up their Teslas to ride a bus. They're probably right. Fortunately, even San Diego's very ambitious Climate Action Plan only calls for 25 percent of people who work near transit to become transit commuters by 2035. We can meet our transit and climate goals without every worker switching to transit.

Our biotech hub is the source of some of our region's highest paying jobs. That is great for the economy. But not everyone who works in biotech is getting rich. Sixty percent of biotech workers have less than a bachelor's degree, many working as bookkeepers, administrative assistants and janitors. Biotech workers support nearby restaurants and retail. Modestly paid workers are the most likely to choose transit. Helping them get to their jobs is a key part of growing this important employment sector for our region.

Land use and housing are also key to making the most of the Mid-Coast. San Diego's update to the University Community Plan should allow robust new growth around the region's transit investments. The more homes and jobs that are located close to trolley stations, the more useful the trolley becomes.

That means eliminating self-defeating rules that limit growth of our biotech campuses. It also means beefing up how many homes, at all income levels, are allowed on the residentially zoned land near transit. The Metropolitan Transit System now owns new parking lots built near trolley stations. The transit agency should continue its efforts to transform empty parking lots into affordable homes.

The San Diego region made a huge investment in our transit system. We should make the most of it.

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