

1 INTRODUCTION

ABOUT ORANGE COUNTY

In 1950, a few years before Interstate 5 was completed and Disneyland opened near one of its off-ramps, citrus groves still covered much of Orange County and the population was just over 200,000 people. In the decades that followed, freeways, tract homes, and shopping centers famously spread across the coastal plain—from the Los Angeles County line into the rolling hills of South County—and “the O.C.” became a prototypical suburban area (if one with world-famous beaches and theme parks).

Today’s Orange County, however, is not your father’s suburb. It is now nearly built-out: vacant sites for “greenfield” or “blank slate” development have almost disappeared. At the same time, the northern part of the county has become ever denser and more culturally diverse. In the 2010 census, the county’s population surpassed 3 million, making it the sixth-largest county in the country. Just 44 percent of residents were non-Hispanic white.

The combined population of Anaheim, Santa Ana, Garden Grove, Orange, and Westminster—the five cities that constitute the urbanized core of the county—is now nearly 1.1 million, in just 132 square miles. If they were a single city, it would be the 10th largest in the country and would have a population density greater than Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Detroit, or Cleveland.

That said, Orange County is still an auto-oriented place: in 2014, less than two percent of households had no car, and 79 percent of commuters drove to work alone. Despite significant transit investments, just over two percent commuted by bus or train. In Los Angeles County, by comparison, seven percent took transit, in San Diego County the figure was close to four percent, and the nationwide average was just over five percent. Even as freeways have continued to expand, Orange County has remained among the most traffic-congested places in America: survey after survey (such as those by the data firm Inrix and the Texas Transportation Institute) has found that the county and its northern neighbor, L.A., together compose the first- or second-most traffic-clogged region in the country. All signs point toward a need for increased travel choices, and for choices that can efficiently, cleanly, and safely move large volumes of people.

HISTORY OF TRANSIT IN ORANGE COUNTY

Transit has been a part of the Orange County landscape for 150 years. Figure 2-1 presents a timeline of transit in the county from 1904 to the present and beyond.

Before OCTA (Pre-1991)

In many ways, Orange County grew up around transit. In 1877, Santa Ana lured the Southern Pacific Railroad away from Tustin with an offer of free land and cash. Starting in 1904, lines of the Pacific Electric (PE) system were extended from Los Angeles into the county as far as the Balboa Peninsula, Santa Ana, Fullerton, and Stern (near Yorba Linda), with a branch line connecting Orange and Huntington Beach. The communities founded around PE stations included Huntington Beach, Stanton, Cypress, and Brea¹; Newport Beach became a tourist destination. The PE's Red Car interurban lines were similar to light rail vehicles found today in L.A. County and San Diego.

By 1950, the Red Cars were gone, soon to be replaced by freeways and buses. The most notable transit-related event during the postwar period was the opening of the Disneyland Monorail in 1959, a tourist attraction that is not part of the public transit system. Still, for a generation of Southern Californians, “rapid transit” would mean monorails—even if the expected wave of urban monorails never materialized.

The Orange County Transit District, the precursor to today's Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA), was established by county voters in 1972. The district unified a patchwork of municipal bus operators, assumed operation of some Southern California RTD routes, and set the stage for OCTA, which has a much broader, more multimodal mandate.

The year 1990 was a turning point in Orange County transit history, as voters approved the county's first “self-help” sales tax dedicated to transportation—the original Measure M. It was also the year the region's transit agencies jointly bought 175 miles of rail right-of-way from the Southern Pacific and AT&T railways, land that eventually formed the core of the Metrolink commuter rail system. And finally, in 1990 Amtrak launched the Orange County Commuter, providing a single daily round trip between San Juan Capistrano and Los Angeles. Transferred to Metrolink in 1994, the service is now known as the Orange County Line and provides up to 15 weekday roundtrips; this is in addition to 29 weekday roundtrips on Metrolink's 91/Perris Valley and Inland Empire-OC lines and Amtrak's Pacific Surfliner, all of which serve Orange County.

Early Days of OCTA (1991-2005)

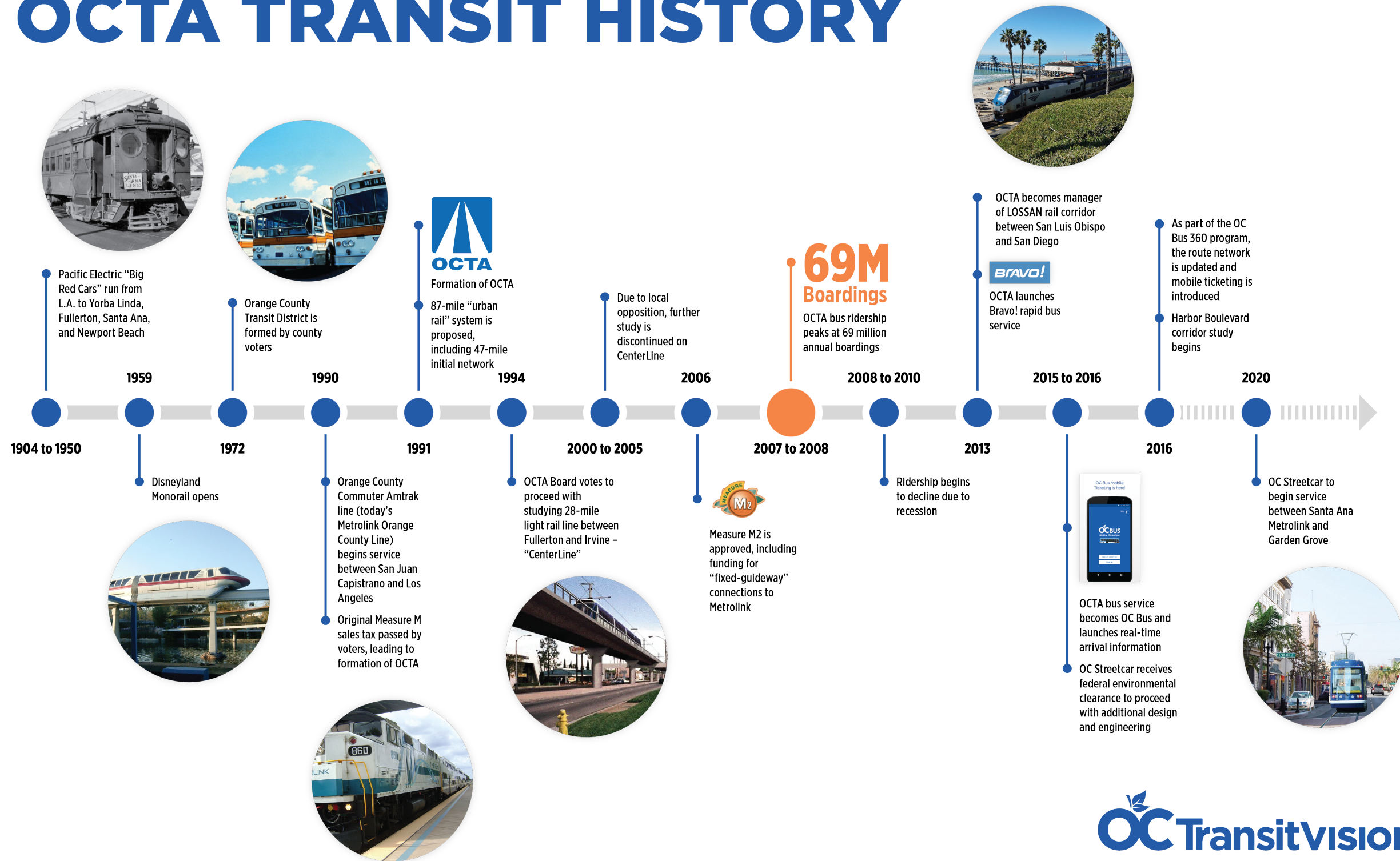
In 1991 the Transit District merged with the Orange County Transportation Commission and other local agencies to form OCTA. Soon after, OCTA produced its first Long-Range Transit System Plan and Development Strategy. Effectively the agency's first transit master plan, it recommended development of an 87-mile urban rail network, new commuter rail stations with expanded service, and more than 40 freeway express bus routes.

Over the next few years, the initial urban rail network would become CenterLine—a proposed 28-mile light rail route running north-south through the core of the county from Fullerton to Irvine. However, CenterLine proved controversial, and the study was discontinued in 2005.

¹ <https://www.kcet.org/shows/lost-la/photos-when-the-red-car-rolled-through-orange-county>

Figure 1-1 Timeline of Transit in Orange County

OCTA TRANSIT HISTORY



Transit has been a part of the Orange County landscape for more than a century.

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Recent Past and Present (2005-Today)

In 2006, county voters renewed Measure M, expanding funding for Metrolink service and fixed guideway (i.e., a rail line or bus rapid transit line in exclusive lanes) connections to Metrolink stations.

Initial plans called for dramatically expanded service on the Orange County Line, which runs roughly northwest-to-southeast through Fullerton, Anaheim, Santa Ana, Irvine, and into South County, and shares the LOSSAN (Los Angeles-San Diego) Rail Corridor with Amtrak's Pacific Surfliner and Metrolink's 91/Perris Valley and Inland Empire-OC lines. But the Great Recession reduced tax revenues and this plan, too, was scaled back for cost reasons. Today, there are a total of 74 weekday trains on the LOSSAN Corridor in Orange County. (Since 2013, OCTA has served as manager of the LOSSAN Corridor, which is owned by an intergovernmental joint powers authority.)

Two fixed-guideway connections were planned using Measure M2 funding. Unlike the CenterLine project, which OCTA managed, these efforts were led by local jurisdictions. They feature streetcars operating in mixed traffic rather than larger light rail trains operating in exclusive rights-of-way.

The first of these efforts to start was the Anaheim Rapid Connection between the Anaheim Regional Transit Intermodal Center (ARTIC) and Disneyland via the Platinum Triangle. This was a study led by the City of Anaheim to potentially build a streetcar project. In 2016, it was decided that any further planning efforts led by Anaheim should be discontinued and, instead, transition to OCTA's Central Harbor Boulevard Transit Corridor Study. The Harbor Study is currently evaluating various alternative routes and transit modes with the intent of improving transit connections along Harbor Boulevard between Fullerton and Santa Ana (the northern segment of the old CenterLine corridor) and on Katella Avenue between ARTIC and the Anaheim Resort.

The second planned fixed-guideway line, OC Streetcar between the Santa Ana Metrolink Station and Garden Grove, is now in final design, has secured funding, and is scheduled to open in 2020. The four-mile route uses the southernmost segment of the PE right-of-way and could serve as the first segment of a longer line running in either the PE right-of-way or on Harbor Boulevard.

Despite successful funding measures and advances in planning for new fixed-guideway services, OCTA's existing bus service has experienced ups-and-downs in recent years. In fiscal year 2007-2008, just before the recession, ridership peaked at nearly 69 million annual boardings. During the recession, service was cut by more than 20 percent and cash fares were raised by one-third; ridership has since fallen more than 30 percent.

At the same time, the agency has made great strides in modernizing.

- In 2013, the same year it took over LOSSAN service, OCTA introduced Bravo! rapid bus service, which makes fewer stops and offers faster and more reliable long-distance trips than traditional buses. Bravo! routes now serve both the Harbor and Westminster corridors.
- In 2014, ARTIC opened; the station has had low initial ridership, but is the planned terminus of Phase 1 of California High-Speed Rail service to San Francisco.
- In 2015, OCTA bus service was rebranded "OC Bus," and real-time bus arrival information became available through smartphone apps.

- In 2016 the agency updated its route network (through the OC Bus 360 program), and it introduced smartphone ticketing.

Each of these actions has taken OCTA another step along the path toward a transit system that is adjusting to the current needs of Orange County residents, workers, and visitors—one that provides attractive alternatives to sitting in traffic and that makes a greater contribution to larger community goals of economic development, environmental sustainability, and social equity. The OC Transit Vision represents the next step in that process, toward development of new higher-capacity rapid transit options in the county's busiest corridors.