

CONSUMER ADVOCATE

Dressing Up the Bus Stop

BY ELLEN STERN HARRIS

I used to take the bus and I loved it. That was years ago, when I could wait in relative comfort at a bus shelter not far from my home. Since then I've moved and although there is a bus stop only a few blocks away, there's no way I'll be found waiting there . . .

Not until the board of directors of the Southern California Transit District (RTD) takes action to provide its waiting passengers with a modicum of comfort.

Even at 25 cents a ride, the bus is a poor bargain if one must stand and wait under a blazing sun or in a drenching rain or exposed to winds. Where benches are provided, one's feet may be relieved but one's lungs are still subjected to the direct assault of emissions from an endless succession of tailpipes.

To get an idea, the RTD board of directors must try waiting 25 minutes for a bus at one of our more heavily trafficked intersections, preferably in poor weather. The directors should also have the experience of transferring, including standing another 25 minutes on a busy street corner. The bus that finally picks them up should take them directly to Fresno.

There, they might take a tour of the 60 bus shelters provided during the past year by the municipally owned Fresno Transit. They're attractively constructed of aluminum framing with clear plastic panels enclosing the back and sides of a natural-finish wooden bench. The overhanging roof is made of an opaque plastic specially designed to minimize heat retention.

Fresno Transit's acting superintendent, Ron Williams, says the response to the shelters has been so great that 12 more have been ordered. "We're very satisfied," he said. "The convenience is tremendous. It's the first time in generations that transit has done anything for the public comfort. We're not buying any more benches without shelters, and community acceptance is so good we've even had businessmen request shelters in front of their establishments.

"It gets very hot here in the summer, he said, "but even when it's 100 degrees we find people are sitting inside those shelters. And we get thank-you letters and letters to the editor of our local paper thanking us, too."

Not Yet Part of the Plan

An RTD official here says providing shelters is not yet a part of the district's plans. But then, providing benches isn't really part of its program either.

"Installation of bus benches is instigated by manufacturers of the benches, who profit by selling advertisements to agencies," he explained. "RTD keeps out of that as much as possible. We only have our own benches on freeway routes. (Bench advertising adjacent to freeways is prohibited by state law.) If citizens want a bench, RTD simply advises them to prevail upon bench manufacturers.

"In fact," he said, "the manufacturers' phone numbers are right there on the benches. Last year, citizens obtained 22 benches."

I wondered what it would cost for the district to obtain benches without subjecting the public to the additional visual clutter of curbside billboards.

I was told that, depending upon the quantity purchased, they run between \$80 and \$100. Most importantly, both shelters and benches ordered by the RTD can be 80% paid for by the federal government.

Shield Against the Street

Again, depending upon the design and size, shelters with benches cost between \$600 and \$1,000. One clear plastic design that particularly interested me was open at both sides, yet offered a shield against the street as well as across the back and ends of the bench.

In all of Los Angeles County, with approximately 25,000 bus stops, there are fewer than 50 shelters. And those were put up mostly by chambers of commerce, cities, schools and hospitals. My RTD source predicted, "If RTD shelters ever appeared on the scene, the demand would be terrific."

Southern Californians are told that for the good of their country they must cut down on their consumption of gasoline and their production of smog. This means giving up the convenience and comfort of their cars, and that won't happen until at least a minimum of convenience and comfort can be found at the corner bus stop.

Mrs. Harris welcomes questions for possible use in her column, but regrets that due to the volume of mail she is unable to respond individually. Send questions and other information to Ellen Stern Harris, Box 228, Beverly Hills 90213.