Orange County Associates Virtual Exchange (OCTAVE)
is a vehicle for collaboration of the **Tourism Cohort**
of the **Jobs First Initiative**,
administered by the **Orange County Business Council**.

Volume 1, Issue 11: Housing & Transportation
August 4, 2026

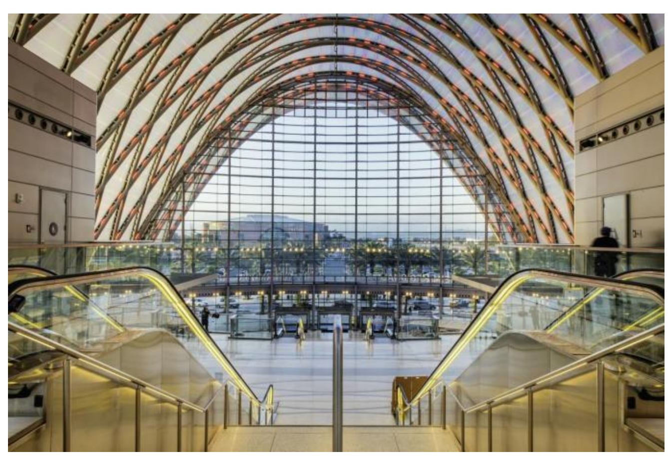
Getting "The Run-Around" to Run Around OC

By Zoot Velasco

Orange County sells itself as a worry-free vacation: sun, surf, and seamless experiences. But once visitors arrive, the reality of getting around often tells a different story. For a county that welcomes more than 50 million visitors annually (not including visitors from neighboring Los Angeles and San Diego), with attractions spread across 948 square miles and a geographically dispersed workforce, transportation remains one of the region's most persistent and under-discussed structural challenges.

Unlike Eastern urban tourism hubs, Orange County was designed around the automobile. Attractions are spread across 34 cities, from beaches to inland destinations. This spatial distribution creates a fundamental mismatch: a world-class tourism product layered onto a transportation network built primarily for private vehicles.

For visitors without cars, particularly international travelers accustomed to robust transit systems, this results in friction at nearly every stage of the trip. The expectation of easy mobility clashes with limited connectivity between key nodes.



The county's primary transit provider, the Orange County Transportation Authority (OCTA), operates an extensive bus network and the OC Streetcar, currently under development in central county, and has worked hard across the 34 incorporated cities that make up the county, the John Wayne Airport, the Metro and Metrolink trains, and other cross-county connections. Yet, three structural gaps limit effectiveness for tourism and workforce mobility:

1. Coverage Gaps Between Tourism Hubs: There is no high-frequency, direct transit spine connecting major visitor destinations. Traveling from John Wayne Airport to Anaheim's resort district, for example, can require multiple transfers and upwards of 90 minutes by bus, compared to a 20–25 minute drive. This result exists despite Anaheim hosting the Anaheim Regional Transportation Intermodal Center (ARTIC). This transportation hub was designed to help move people into and out of Anaheim and to North County connections and has helped ease public transportation issues since its addition to the region in 2014. It is an important building block for further expansion.

2. Frequency and Reliability: Many OCTA routes operate at 30–60-minute intervals outside peak hours. For tourists on tight schedules or hospitality workers commuting across shifts, this unpredictability discourages use. Evening and late-night service, critical for restaurant, hotel, and entertainment workers, is particularly limited. For example, commuter trains outside of rush hours are rare.

3. First/Last-Mile Barriers: Even when transit is available, the distance between stops and final destinations can be prohibitive. Large resort properties, coastal zones, and employment centers are often not easily walkable from bus stops, especially in a region with inconsistent pedestrian infrastructure.

Transportation is not just a visitor experience issue; it is a workforce issue. Orange County's tourism and hospitality sector depends heavily on workers who often live in more affordable inland areas or neighboring counties. (See our article with more detail on housing issues below.)

Employees commuting to coastal cities or resort zones face long, multi-transfer trips, which add emotional strain, or must rely on car ownership, which adds significant financial strain. In a labor market already strained by housing affordability, transportation becomes a compounding barrier to workforce stability.

Employers report that unreliable transit contributes to higher absenteeism and lateness, reduced applicant pools for hard-to-fill roles, and increased turnover, particularly in hourly positions. In a labor market already strained by housing affordability, transportation becomes a compounding barrier to workforce stability.

From the visitors' perspective, the lack of intuitive, connected transit options shapes behavior and spending. Tourists without cars tend to limit their activities to a single destination (e.g., staying within the Disneyland resort area), avoid exploring coastal or cultural assets beyond their immediate base, or rely heavily on ride-hailing services, increasing trip costs and congestion. This "siloed tourism" reduces cross-destination visitation and limits the economic spillover that benefits smaller businesses and secondary attractions.

Orange County's car dependency also has broader implications. Tourism-driven traffic contributes to congestion on key corridors such as I-5 and the Pacific Coast Highway, particularly during peak seasons and major events. Coasta;

At the same time, the state's climate goals are pushing regions to reduce vehicle miles traveled (VMT). Without viable transit alternatives, the tourism sector faces increasing pressure to reconcile growth with sustainability commitments.

There are promising developments, though many remain incremental relative to the scale of the challenge:

- The OC Streetcar (OCTA) aims to improve connectivity in central Orange County, linking dense employment and cultural areas. While not directly serving major tourist hubs, it represents a step toward more fixed-route, high-frequency transit.

- Metrolink and Amtrak Pacific Surfliner: Regional rail services connect Orange County to Los Angeles, San Diego, and beyond. Stations in Anaheim and Irvine provide important entry points, but last-mile connections to hotels and attractions, as well as trains in off-peak hours, remain inconsistent.

- Local Circulators and Shuttles: Seasonal and city-based services, such as beach trolleys help bridge gaps within specific zones. However, these systems are often fragmented, with separate fare structures and limited geographic scope.

- Microtransit and On-Demand Pilots: OCTA and local jurisdictions have explored microtransit solutions designed to improve first/last-mile connectivity. While promising, these programs are still in pilot phases and face scalability challenges.

Addressing transportation gaps will require coordinated action among public agencies, private operators, and the tourism sector. Key opportunities include:

- Destination-Based Transit Partnerships: Hotels, attractions, and DMOs could co-invest in dedicated shuttle networks linking major nodes, airports, resort areas, beaches, and transit stations, creating a more seamless visitor experience.

- Integrated Ticketing and Wayfinding: Simplifying fare systems across OCTA, Metrolink, and local circulators would reduce confusion. Clear, tourism-oriented wayfinding (both physical and digital) can make existing transit more usable.

- Advocacy for Service Expansion: The tourism industry has a strong case to advocate for increased frequency, extended service hours, and direct routes connecting key visitor corridors.

- Employer-Supported Transportation Programs: Subsidized transit passes, vanpools, and employer-sponsored shuttles executed with strategic planning can help mitigate workforce access challenges, particularly for late-night and early-morning shifts.

For Orange County, transportation is no longer just an infrastructure concern. It is a competitiveness issue shaped by both local realities and statewide policy. As destinations around the world invest in seamless, multimodal mobility, the expectation that visitors and workers can move easily without a car is quickly becoming the baseline.

California is beginning to lay important groundwork. State investments in transit, rail, integrated ticketing, and active transportation, along with climate-driven policies and transit-oriented development, signal a long-term shift toward a more connected system. Initiatives aimed at simplifying fare payment, improving regional rail, and funding first/last-mile solutions have the potential to reduce many of the friction points that currently define the Orange County experience.

But these efforts are largely long-term and system-wide, while Orange County's challenges are immediate and highly localized. The gaps between airports, hotels, beaches, and job centers, and the daily realities faced by hospitality workers commuting across the region, will not be solved by state policy alone.

That leaves a clear mandate for the tourism industry and local partners: to bridge the gap between vision and execution by actively leveraging state funding opportunities rather than waiting for top-down solutions; building public-private partnerships that create direct, high-frequency connections between key destinations; advocating for public transit service levels (frequency, hours, and reliability) that reflect the realities of a 24/7 visitor economy; and investing in workforce mobility as a core business strategy, not a secondary concern. If Orange County can align state resources with local innovation, it has an opportunity to turn a longstanding weakness into a defining strength. If not, the risk is clear: a world-class destination, where getting around remains the hardest part of the trip… for visitors and workers alike.

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ACCOMMODATIONS FOR THE ACCOMMODATING

Housing Affordability and OC's Tourism Workforce: A Structural Challenge

By Zoot Velasco

Orange County's tourism economy continues to show resilience and growth post-pandemic, with gains in hotel occupancy, rising statewide room revenue, and nearly 30,000 new jobs projected in tourism and recreation by 2035. Yet beneath this strong performance lies a structural challenge that increasingly threatens the industry's long-term sustainability: housing affordability for hospitality and events workers. This is not a new issue by a long shot, but the gap just keeps getting more chasmic.

It's ironic that those who work in visitor accommodations themselves cannot find affordable lodging in pricey OC, one of the most expensive housing markets in the United States. The average home value exceeds $1.1 million this year, while limited inventory and land constraints continue to push prices upward. At the same time, the county's workforce includes a significant share of service-sector employees, many of whom work in tourism, where wages do not keep pace with housing costs.

This imbalance creates a widening affordability gap. Workforce housing is typically Class B and C units: Classifications used in real estate to denote the age, quality, location, and amenity level of multifamily buildings. Class B units are older (10-25+ years), functional, well-maintained, and often seen as value-add investments. Class C units are older (20-30+ years old), located in less desirable areas, in need of repairs, and offer affordable housing. However, even these types of housing have extremely low vacancy rates, around 2.8%, indicating intense demand and limited availability for middle- to lower-income workers. For hospitality employees such as housekeepers, line cooks, event staff, and front-line guest services workers, the result is a growing inability to live near their workplaces.

The housing crisis directly affects the tourism workforce. Employers across Orange County report ongoing difficulty recruiting and retaining staff, particularly for entry- and mid-level hospitality roles. While tourism demand is projected to grow significantly, the available workforce is increasingly constrained by cost-of-living pressures. Workers often leave the region altogether or seek employment in higher-wage industries or in roles with remote-work flexibility. This contributes to chronic understaffing, reduced service levels, and increased operational costs for hotels, restaurants, and event venues.

A substantial number of workers commute to Orange County from more affordable inland areas. Over 212,000 workers already travel into the county for employment, reflecting a regional job-housing imbalance. For hospitality employees, long commutes can lead to unreliable schedules, higher transportation costs, and reduced job satisfaction, all of which further increase turnover in an already volatile labor market.

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High housing costs also restrict career progression. Workers who might otherwise pursue supervisory or management roles are unable to remain in the region long enough to advance. This weakens the talent pipeline for leadership positions in tourism and events, forcing employers to recruit externally at a higher cost.

The effects of workforce housing challenges extend beyond employers to the visitor experience itself. Staffing shortages can lead to reduced service quality and longer wait times, limited hours or service offerings at hospitality venues, and increased reliance on temporary or less experienced workers. In a competitive global tourism market, these factors can erode Orange County's reputation as a high-quality destination, particularly in premium segments such as coastal resorts and convention-driven travel.

The meetings-and-events sector faces distinct vulnerabilities. Large-scale conventions, festivals, and corporate gatherings depend on a flexible, scalable workforce. Housing constraints make it difficult for staff to handle peak-demand periods, especially when workers must travel long distances or secure temporary accommodations.

This challenge is particularly relevant near key event hubs such as Anaheim and coastal destinations. In coastal destinations, housing costs are among the highest in the county. The mismatch between event-driven labor demand and the availability of local workforce housing could limit the region's ability to compete for large-scale events.

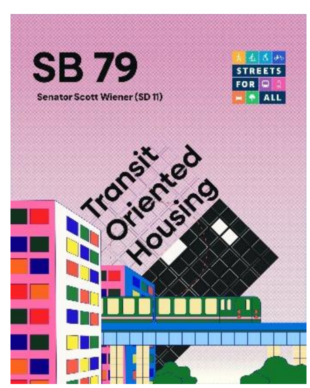
Orange County's housing challenges are rooted in structural factors. Limited land availability restricts new development and creates persistent underproduction of affordable housing relative to job growth. Meanwhile, population growth and high incomes sustain demand for housing. Also, strong real estate investment activity further pressures supply. At the same time, the county's tourism sector is expanding, creating a paradox: job growth without the corresponding housing growth needed to house the workers filling those jobs.

Addressing workforce housing challenges requires coordinated action across public and private sectors. Current and proposed approaches include:

- Workforce housing development incentives to increase the supply of affordable units
- Public-private partnerships between cities, developers, and major employers
- Zoning reforms and density increases near transit and employment centers
- State-level housing mandates and funding programs aimed at accelerating production
- Transportation initiatives, making it easier for workers to commute from transit hubs

Regional reports emphasize the need for strategic workforce investment, including the alignment of housing, education, and employment systems to meet future demand.

California's SB 79, signed into law in 2025 and taking effect beginning July 1, 2026, could offer some help. It encourages higher-density residential development near major transit corridors. The law allows qualifying multifamily housing projects near designated transit stops to bypass many local zoning restrictions, increasing allowable height and density around rail stations and major bus corridors. Supporters argue this "transit-oriented development" approach can help create more workforce-accessible housing near employment centers, potentially reducing the long commutes faced by hospitality and events workers who often travel into Orange County from more affordable inland communities.



By expanding housing supply near transit, SB 79 may also help employers in tourism hubs such as Anaheim and coastal destinations recruit and retain workers more effectively. Critics, however, argue that the bill could face local resistance, strain on infrastructure, and raise concerns about displacement if affordable units are not adequately included. Nevertheless, SB 79 represents one of California's most aggressive recent attempts to address the state's housing shortage through land-use reform tied directly to transportation access and workforce mobility.

Housing affordability is no longer a peripheral issue for Orange County's tourism industry. It is a central operational and strategic concern. As the sector continues to grow, its success will depend not only on attracting visitors but also on sustaining the workforce that delivers the visitor experience.

Without meaningful progress on workforce housing, the region risks a cycle of labor shortages, rising costs, and diminished service quality. Conversely, addressing this challenge presents an opportunity: to strengthen the tourism economy, improve workforce stability, and ensure that Orange County remains a competitive, world-class destination.

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Upcoming Job Fairs

📌 **August 2026**

- **Orange County Job Fair & Career Fair**
  📍 Courtyard Marriott Santa Ana
  🗓 **August 13, 2026** — regularly scheduled fair series.
- Orange County Virtual Job Fair – *Aug 18, 2026*

NOTE: Additional Job Fairs are available to registered students at all local Colleges and Universities. Check with your College Counselors.

OCTAVE is a newsletter of the Orange County Business Council. Send us your questions, tourism success stories, needs, challenges, best practices, skills gaps, and emerging trends, and we will try to include the most relevant ones in OCTAVE!

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