

MTA provides funds to study Eco-Rapid rail project

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LOS ANGELES — Construction preparation for a rail line that will connect Union Station downtown with Artesia and cities in between will begin with an environmental impact study and community outreach efforts.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority Board of Directors has unanimously approved a funding agreement with the Gateway Cities Council of Governments, based in Paramount, to help the 13 cities along the rail corridor participate in the study, which will include determining which parts will be built above or below ground.

The Eco-Rapid Transit Joint Powers Authority, a partnership among the Gateway Cities and other public authorities to promote the development of a transit system in the area, will spearhead the effort.

"I congratulate Eco-Rapid's board and staff and the Gateway Cities Council of Governments for their hard work and commitment in spite of delays in seeking to fully fund the Eco-Rapid Light-Rail Project," state Sen. Tony Mendoza, D-Artesia, said in a statement.

"I look forward to working closely with our Southeast cities to ensure the study is completed as soon as possible."

The MTA board approved contracts with Parsons Brinkerhoff Inc. to complete the environmental study, and with Arrellano Associates to handle the community outreach.

The 20-mile West Santa Ana Branch Transit Corridor, as the line is also known, will travel through the cities of Artesia, Bell, Bellflower, Bell Gardens, Cudahy, Cerritos, Downey, Huntington Park, Lynwood, Los Angeles, Maywood, Paramount, South Gate and Vernon.

The end result will allow riders as far south as Cerritos to travel as far north as Chatsworth, with only one stop in between in North Hollywood.

"It will offer increased employment and other opportunities," said Karen Hait, the transportation deputy for Gateway Cities Council of Governments, which represents about 30 cities in Southeast Los Angeles County. "It's really 'far out' in terms of mobility potential."

The rail is slated for construction in two phases: in the first, the line will be built from Artesia to a new station on the MTA Green Line, which will be placed between Paramount Boulevard and Gardendale Street, on the border of Downey and South Gate. The estimated completion date is 2027.

The second phase will continue construction north to Union Station, which is predicted to wrap up in 2041.

When completed, an estimated 70,000 to 80,000 people will ride the train every day, which is more than any current or proposed light-rail line in the L.A. area, due to the high population density of the Gateway Cities.

"This is a historic milestone for our cities and community," Maria Davila, chair of Eco-Rapid Transit and the vice mayor of South Gate.

The project is one of the 12 transit projects funded by Measure R, the half-cent sales tax L.A. County voters approved in 2008. Approximately \$240 million in Measure R funds have been designated for the rail line and is currently funding the environmental work. Overall, the project is estimated to cost about \$4 billion.

According to Hait, Gateway Cities hoped the gap would be filled by funds from Measure M, a November ballot measure to raise the sales tax in L.A. County by a half-cent to fund transportation projects.

But newer initiatives have taken priority, pushing the rail line back on the funding agenda, a development Hait described as "disappointing."

Sen. Mendoza agreed.

"While my constituents are disappointed that the project was 'redlined' for any funds for the next 15 years from Measure M ... they will be pleased that non-Measure M funds will be used to keep the line's planning process moving forward."

The MTA is currently searching for public-private partners to supplement the rest of the funding.

"We believe the rail can be funded without Measure M," Hait said.