SCAG Reveals Options for Santa Ana ROW

By Numan Parada

The Southern California Association of Governments released an initial executive summary of a proposed rapid transit project along a branch of the former Pacific Electric Railway towards Santa Ana. This former PE branch line ran from what is now the Metro Blue Line in Watts southeasterly to Santa Ana until 1950, when the service was cut back to Bellflower. Bellflower lost passenger service in 1958, although freight service continued thereafter. Several old PE stations remain, with the Bellflower station now refurbished.

The branch was abandoned in three sections: The Watts-Paramount section in the 1970s, the middle section from Paramount to Stanton in 2003, and the southernmost section from Stanton to Santa Ana in 1978.

Part of the right-of-way through Lynwood was used to complete the 105 Freeway (and subsequently the Metro Green Line), while the northernmost segment was turned into a local park.

The Alternative Analysis study aimed to find ways to provide high-performance public transit between Los Angeles Union Station and Santa Ana using this ROW. Possible technologies discussed include light rail, streetcar, bus rapid transit, and maglev. The study also considered no-build and Transportation Systems Management options.

According to the study, several factors favor a transit line on this right-of-way. "The Corridor is home to 4.5 million people – four times the population of San Diego, California’s second largest city," the study explained.

"By 2035, population will grow by more than 500,000 residents with one in three Los Angeles and Orange County residents living in the Corridor.”

High residential density (at 12,000 people per square mile), high employment density (at 5,400 jobs per square mile), and a large proportion of low-income households also figured into a need for a transit line. 16% of households in the area currently lack access to an automobile, the study noted.

The study also took note of the limited travel options residents and employees have. Connections to Metro and Metrolink are non-existent, and access to job and activity centers remain poor, despite the availability of bus systems.

SCAG held public meetings over a course of 27 months to receive input on the proposal. Attendees at these meetings have expressed enthusiasm for rapid transit in their area. At each meeting, residents repeatedly pointed out the woefully inadequate bus service that many must currently depend on. Buses run infrequently and within limited hours, with poor coordination between bus systems, according to participants.

Attendees also reveled at the opportunity for transit-oriented development in their communities, seeing it as a catalyst for economic growth and a purveyor of pedestrian-friendly lifestyles. There was also a greater desire to see open space and trails along the largely undeveloped right-of-way.

When SCAG officials at the meetings presented the technology choices under consideration, participants strongly favored the light rail option.

Attendees felt that light rail is a proven technology that can provide the right balance of local and regional transportation for communities on the corridor. Participants felt the station spacing would support community economic development and revitalization needs.

Most believed that maglev may work if used at a lower speed with more stops, in contrast to its usual method of deployment as a much speedier connector between two distant locations. Some residents, especially in northern Orange County, felt that a no-build option was (continue on Page 5)
light rail would attract 87,000 daily riders

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the best, citing noise and traffic impact concerns.

Bus rapid transit was initially favored by some for its low cost, but its perception as nothing more than a faster bus hampered its appeal. The route towards Los Angeles once off the right-of-way would obviate dedicated lanes, hindering efficiency in comparison to a light rail route.

All fixed-guideway options (light rail, streetcar, and maglev) would use the right-of-way from Harbor Blvd. and Westminster Ave. in Santa Ana northwest to the Union Pacific Railroad tracks near the 105 Freeway, just east of the Los Angeles River.

Then, the route would follow the tracks north to Gage Ave. in Bell. There, four route options are left for further consideration: Three of them on the west bank of the LA River, one of them on the east bank. All routes would end at Union Station.

A bus rapid transit option would gain as many as 67,200 daily riders, 26,600 of which would be new riders, at a cost of $1.1 billion, assuming there are dedicated lanes once off the ROW. The streetcar option, using the third west bank option, would attract 79,000 riders, with 26,000 of those new riders, for $2.9 billion. A light rail option on the same route would attract 87,200 riders, of which 32,800 would be new riders, at a cost of $3.2 billion. A low-speed maglev option would bring in 76,000 riders, 28,400 new riders, at a cost of $7.4 billion.

In all cases, the West Bank 3 option would provide the fastest end-to-end times, the lowest operations costs and the highest ridership. However, it also had the highest construction costs and would require cumbersome connections with the rest of Metro Rail at Little Tokyo. At the southern end, all options except maglev would leave the ROW and use city streets, either 17th St. or 1st St., to reach the Santa Ana Regional Transportation Center, with connections to Metrolink and Amtrak.

SCAG is performing the study, since the project would cross both Los Angeles and Orange Counties. A total of $240 million is available for the project through Measure R. With an Alternative Analysis study now prepared, a SCAG steering committee will make final recommendations in June to be carried forward for environmental studies.

Huntington Park officials recently expressed their support for rail in their community by asking for two light rail stations on the West Santa Ana Branch route, a Measure R project currently under study by SCAG.

City planners also expressed their support for the West Bank Alternative 3, which would bring the route further west. Two other alternatives being considered by SCAG place only one station in the Huntington Park city limits.

Portions of this article were excerpted from www.abandonedrails.com. Zach Gutierrez contributed to this report.

For more information on the current project and to see a copy of the executive summary, visit www.pacificelectriccorridor.com

Riverside HOT Lanes Must Be Done Right

By Nicholas Ventrone

The Riverside County Transportation Commission considered adopting a toll policy for the proposed 91 Express Lanes Extension Project in May.

The proposed policy will reflect OCTA’s policy where 3+ carpools may travel free except during the PM peak hour going eastbound whereas 3+ carpools would pay 50% of the posted toll.

There was no report of whether 3+ carpools would be mandated to have a FasTrak transponder; current OCTA policy requires vehicles to use the device.

The Transit Coalition advocates for free open access for such carpools (i.e. no requirement to have a FasTrak transponder). In lieu of charging a 50% toll to carpools during the PM rush hour, The Transit Coalition also advocates for free 24/7 access for any 3+ vehicle while raising the tolls for other traffic. Should the corridor get too heavy, only 3+ carpools should freely use the lanes.

An outside study by UC Berkeley shows that this policy would better promote 3+ ridesharing; San Diego and Santa Clara counties use this structure (except local demographics permit for 2+ carpools instead of three). Several other agencies throughout the country also have adopted this policy.

If you support free carpool access into Southern California toll lanes without a transponder requirement and would like LA, OC, and Riverside County to follow the example of several other agencies in the nation, please consider contacting your local representative and let them know that you want HOT done right.