

# Will More Transit Actually Ease L.A.'s Traffic?

TUESDAY, MARCH 15, 2016 AT 6:30 A.M.

BY GENE MADDAUS



The Access Culver City project, at left, soon will offer luxury housing next to the Expo Line station.

*Photo by Ryan Orange*

In early January, L.A. Mayor Eric Garcetti convened a meeting with some of the country's largest engineering and construction firms. Around the table at City Hall were big shots including Ron Tutor, chairman-CEO of Tutor Perini; Scott Cassels, a senior vice president at Kiewit Construction; and Michael Burke, CEO of AECOM.

Garcetti had invited them to share his vision for the future of L.A.'s transit system. Under his predecessor, Antonio Villaraigosa, voters had agreed to a half-cent sales tax that funded a dozen rail lines. Garcetti wanted to do something similar, but on a much bigger scale.

Garcetti's proposed tax would raise \$120 billion — three times the amount Villaraigosa had raised. The mayor was light on specifics that day, but the bottom line was clear. He wanted to build a lot of new transit, and the people assembled in the room would be called upon to construct it.

“The mayor’s top priority, as far as I can ascertain, is to get a second generation of transit funding,” says former county supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, who worked closely with Villaraigosa on the last transit tax. “It’s ambitious.”

The story of L.A.’s transit system is a story of big dreams. When Tom Bradley ran for mayor in 1973, he promised to quickly break ground on a new subway system. He stayed in office for 20 years, just long enough to see the opening of the first segment of the Red Line. Supervisor Kenneth Hahn pushed in 1980 for a transit tax that helped pay for the Blue Line, which opened a decade later along an old freight corridor through the heart of his South L.A. district.

Villaraigosa and Yaroslavsky left their marks as well, passing Measure R in 2008. The measure’s key item was a bit of unfinished business from the Bradley era — a subway down Wilshire Boulevard that, with any luck, will finally form the spine of the system sometime in the next decade.

This week, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority is expected to unveil its plans for the new transit tax, which would allow Garcetti to put his own thumbprint on the system. The headline-grabber is a subway through the Sepulveda Pass, connecting the San Fernando Valley to the Westside and LAX, and providing an alternative to the 405 freeway, home to some of the worst traffic jams in the nation. Other lines — on Crenshaw Boulevard, Vermont Avenue and Van Nuys Boulevard — would create north-south connections, turning the current hub-and-spoke system into a spider’s web.

If it passes, the plan would create something like a real workable transit system, which hasn’t been seen in Los Angeles for generations. But that’s if it passes. It first must get support from two-thirds of the county’s voters, which will be difficult.

“Everything’s gotta go perfectly for Metro politically,” Yaroslavsky says. “High turnout. No controversy. No sidebar debates about transportation and development. Anything that would retard the ‘yes’ vote is an existential threat to the measure.”

## The Future of L.A.'s Transit System (Maybe)



L.A. Weekly

### Where tracks are laid, development will follow

A campaign to back a transit tax always starts in the same place: Voters are fed up with gridlock. Over the last year, the MTA has done polling and conducted 14 focus groups to test voter sentiment about a new ballot measure.

“Easing traffic is what resonated with people,” says Pauletta Tonilas, the MTA’s communications director. “We believe that’s something that can happen.”

An MTA poll conducted a year ago found support for a ballot measure at about 70 percent.

“There’s been some research, and it has been very encouraging,” says Bill Carrick, Garcetti’s political consultant, who will be running the campaign to pass the measure. “If you have a ballot measure over two-thirds, you have a pretty good shot.”

Still, there’s not much room for error. And there’s a risk that the transit measure will be consumed by a broader conversation about density and development.

Transit planning is also land-use planning. Wherever new tracks are laid, developers are encouraged to follow. A vision for a new transit system is also a vision for reshaping communities throughout the county.

The idea is that building high-density projects around stations creates walkable neighborhoods and lessens the impact of traffic while providing much-needed housing. But wherever this theory is applied, it seems to generate a backlash.

In Hollywood, developers have been putting up high-rises and mixed-use complexes around Red Line stops. The proposal for one particular project — the Millennium Hollywood — calls for nearly 500 condos, plus 200 hotel rooms, inside two towers — one 35 stories tall, the other 39 stories. And it has spurred an anti-development revolt.

The project would be about a block away from the subway stop at Hollywood and Vine, and its developers contend that it would help ease traffic by providing convenient transit access. But it also would include 2,000 parking spaces — an indication that no one truly expects residents of the luxury project to give up their cars.

A group of Hollywood activists has organized to place an anti-development measure on the March 2017 ballot. The “Neighborhood Integrity Initiative” would halt “mega-projects” across the city.

It is possible that the two items will become joined in the public imagination. If people see a transit tax as encouraging development and thus contributing to traffic, rather than easing it, they may well vote it down.

“They promise relief of congestion. They say that’s their mission,” says Jill Stewart, the campaign director of the Neighborhood Integrity Initiative (and former managing editor of the *L.A. Weekly*). “Then Metro goes in and creates new congestion that they cannot relieve.” On the other hand, there is a case to be made — in light of the soaring cost of housing in L.A. — for allowing much more residential development.

“Our city continues to grow,” says Edgar Khalatian, an attorney at Mayer Brown, who represents developers and real estate investors. “We want to increase the entertainment industry and bring more tech jobs. We’re going to bring more bodies to L.A., which means we need more housing.”

If focus groups suggested that a two-thirds supermajority was attracted to that argument, then the MTA might be making it. But that is not the case. So the agency is selling the transit tax as a congestion-relief measure.

Around the county, different communities are reacting to the spread of the rail network in different ways. Most welcome the convenience of a rail station while they wrestle with the changes that rail can bring. What follows is an on-the-ground examination of how three communities are dealing with that change.



Developers are planning to build a mixed-use project on the site of the Expo Line parking lot.

*Photo by Ryan Orange*

### **Culver City: Is transit-adjacent development moving too fast?**

Culver City is, for now, the westernmost rail stop on the Expo Line. In a couple of months, the line will open all the way to Santa Monica. Built around the old MGM studios, now Sony, Culver City had long been a middle-class community of modest single-family homes.

In the last decade, the downtown has been redeveloped with high-end restaurants, coffee shops and live theater. The city also boasts a growing tech hub, with businesses including Maker Studios and Beats. With good schools, it has become an irresistible neighborhood for upscale families.

“I never see a house go for less than \$1 million,” says Councilwoman Meghan Sahli-Wells. “Culver City was the last bastion of the affordable Westside, and now that’s over.”

The city has encouraged midrise housing development downtown and next to the Expo Line

station. The station, at Washington and National boulevards, is about a half-mile east of downtown. A few years ago, it was an unremarkable industrial corner. Now it's changing fast.

The Platform development — a mix of high-end galleries, boutiques and pastry shops — just opened to the southwest of the train station, on the site of a former used car lot. On the southeast corner, where a roofing supply store once stood, builders are finishing work on a 115-unit luxury apartment complex with ground-floor retail.

On the northwest corner, where there used to be a nursery, developers plan to build the Ivy Station, a 200-unit residential building with office and restaurant spaces, plus a 148-room hotel. Restaurant supply store Surfas has been located on the northeast corner for nearly 30 years. Developers plan to tear it down and put up an 80-unit condo building with creative offices and ground-floor retail.

Some residents to the east of this intersection view this development with alarm.

“The traffic already on Washington Boulevard is atrocious,” says Ken Mand, of the group Arts District Residents for Responsible Development, who argues that the traffic studies for these projects were deeply flawed. “They are far underestimating the reality of traffic as it currently stands. Nothing they did was illegal or wrong. But the reality is it's all fucked up.”

The city did not mandate that a portion of the housing units be set aside for lower-income residents, and Mand doubts the new residents will take the train.

“They're just adding a ton of apartments and a ton of retail that is not geared toward Culver City residents,” he says. “Culver City residents are not shopping for \$150-an-ounce hand lotion. ... It's all about the Google people that are coming to town. It's all about pour-over coffee.”

Worse yet, from his perspective, is what's in the works for the La Cienega train station, one stop to the east, within the Los Angeles city limits. There, developers are planning to build the Cumulus project — 1,200 housing units, plus a grocery store, restaurants, office space and 2,400 parking spaces.

The current height limit at that intersection is 45 feet. The height limit at other transit stations on the Expo route — such as Sepulveda and Bundy — tops out around 160 feet. The Cumulus project will tower 320 feet above the ground.

“It's pretty crazy,” says Jamie Hall, an attorney for La Cienega Heights, a predominantly African-American and Latino homeowners group, which is fighting the project. “It's gonna make traffic a lot worse.”



An artist's rendering of the future Leimert Park station

*Metropolitan Transportation Authority*

### **Leimert Park: Rail is driving gentrification, if not development**

Three and a half miles southeast of Culver City is Leimert Park. Known as the soul of L.A.'s African-American community, the village is home to Afro-centric shops and artists' spaces.

The surrounding neighborhoods are full of old Craftsman and Spanish-style houses. For the last few years, housing prices there have been on the rise, as many renters from the Westside and Silver Lake sought an affordable neighborhood in which to buy their first home. It's now hard to find a decent house in Leimert Park for less than \$600,000.

"The market has gone up so much, and 85 percent of that is because of the train," says Heather Presha, a Realtor in Leimert Park. "Everyone is in a huge, frantic panic that they're not going to be in the parade."

The Crenshaw Line is expected to open in late 2019, and Leimert Park fought for, and won, its own station at Vernon Avenue. There is widespread hope that the line will help revitalize the neighborhood, bringing in diners and shoppers to support black-owned businesses.

"Leimert Park Village is never gonna be a big thing, but hopefully it's gonna be a much more vibrant and active village," says Clint Rosemond, a longtime community leader. "Maybe we'll get something in the way of a community library. Perhaps we'll get a museum."

Commercial developers have big plans for a few parcels to the north of Leimert Park, at Exposition Boulevard and adjacent to the Baldwin Hills Plaza. But within the village itself, the commercial market is relatively flat — a sharp contrast with the residential market.

“The feeding frenzy hasn’t really started yet,” says Dean J. Flowers, a commercial broker in Leimert Park. “It’s a little early. The next couple years, we’re going to see things percolating.”



The Crenshaw Line is under construction in Leimert Park.

*Photo by Ryan Orange*

Some Leimert Park planners say they’re looking at Culver City and Pasadena as models to emulate. The largest developable parcels in the village are a couple of city-owned parking lots. So far, there are talks about building mixed-use projects on those sites, but it hasn’t gotten beyond talk.

There is also some wariness, as there would be in other neighborhoods, about building too many apartments.

“The NIMBY-ism is not limited to the Westside,” says Brenda Shockley, president of Community Build, a local nonprofit.

The surrounding area has one of the highest concentrations of black wealth in the country and a very high rate of homeownership. The fear of apartments has less to do with traffic and more to do with concerns about crime and safety.

But as housing prices rise, there is also a concern about the arrival of outsiders — notably well-off, white homebuyers.

“People are really, really fearful that this neighborhood is being taken from them,” says Ben Caldwell, an artist and filmmaker.

As white people have moved into Leimert Park in the last few years, their black neighbors have taken note. Caldwell says black residents aren’t used to seeing so many joggers on their streets.

“The real indicator for this community is walking the dog,” he says. “That’s more of a Westside relationship with a dog.”

The diversification of the neighborhood has rarely, if ever, resulted in overt conflict — except perhaps in conversations on Nextdoor.

“You won’t find much resistance between the old-school black folks and the people coming in,” Presha says. “It’ll be thought, but not said.”



Cudahy is hoping a new station will revitalize the area around an old water tower at Florence and Salt Lake avenues.

*Photo by Ryan Orange*

## **Cudahy: Dreams of transit-spurred development remain distant**

About 10 miles southeast of downtown L.A. is the tiny city of Cudahy. It is an immigrant suburb, almost entirely Latino, with a poverty rate that's nearly twice that of L.A. County. It is also one of the densest cities in the state, with a population that relies heavily on public transit.

For more than a decade, community leaders have been lobbying for a rail line that would connect Cudahy to downtown L.A. The Eco-Rapid Line, as it is called, would run along an old freight corridor from Artesia through southeast cities including Bellflower, Huntington Park, Maywood and Vernon, with a possible stop in the downtown L.A. Arts District before reaching Union Station. The line is currently set to open in 2027, but it may take longer than that.

The southeast cities once were home to slaughterhouses and heavy manufacturing facilities. Most of those jobs are gone, though there is still work to be found in warehouses and textile plants. Among some cities' leaders, there is a sense of being left behind.

“The southeast cities have been getting the short end of the stick,” says Karina Macias, a councilwoman in Huntington Park.

Many see the Eco-Rapid Line as a spur to economic development.

“It will bring jobs when all this is done,” says Maria Davila, a councilwoman from South Gate. “It will bring a lot of great things to the community.”

In Cudahy, city officials are reworking the general plan to allow for the kind of mixed-use development that has occurred at stations in other cities.



A concept for the Cudahy/Huntington Park station, with new mixed-use development

*Eco-Rapid Transit Authority*

“Cudahy has been neglected when it comes to entertainment,” says Cristian Markovich, the city’s 29-year-old mayor.

Right now, he says residents have to travel to other cities to see a movie or have a nice meal.

Cudahy expects to have two stations. One would be at Florence and Salt Lake avenues, on the border of Huntington Park. Now there’s a liquor store and a dry cleaner on that corner, across from a large water tower. The plan is to put in a mix of offices, retail and apartment buildings. The water tower would remain as a sort of iconic landmark.

The other station would be at Firestone Boulevard and Atlantic Avenue. On the northeast corner, there is currently a 7-Eleven, a vacant furniture store and some auto body shops. Consultants have drawn up plans to build a few three-story apartment buildings, a hotel, offices and a daycare center.

But it may be many years before these plans become reality, if they ever do. The Blue Line never generated much growth between downtown L.A. and Long Beach.

“It’s not a magic tool for economic development,” says Rick Willson, a professor of urban planning at Cal Poly Pomona, who has consulted on the Eco-Rapid project. “If the market’s weak before, it’ll be weak after.”

### **If you build it, will they come? Should they?**

One of the ironies of transportation planning is that some of the current or proposed routes serving areas with higher ridership — the Blue Line, the Eco-Rapid Line — are less promising for development, while some of the routes with more obvious development potential — the Expo Line, the Gold Line — have struggled to find ridership.

The combination of both factors is what makes the Wilshire subway — 40 years in the making — are such an obvious and urgent priority.

“You can’t think of the two in isolation,” says Ethan Elkind, author of *Railtown*, a history of L.A.’s transit system. “Transit only works so far as the land use around it is made convenient to rail. It’s not enough just to build the rail line.”

“Transit only works so far as the land use around it is made convenient to rail. It’s not enough just to build the rail line.” —Ethan Elkind, author of *Railtown*, a history of L.A.’s transit system

To date, rail planners have had to make do with significant fiscal and political constraints. Often, it has been cheapest to build rail lines on old freight corridors. That pattern can be seen again and again, on the Blue Line, the Orange Line, the Expo Line and the Crenshaw Line. Those freight

lines were generally designed to serve industrial areas and to avoid commercial centers. This explains why they sometimes run just out of reach of vibrant and walkable shopping districts.

Having built those lines, planners then set about rezoning the surrounding area for high-density housing and retail, in order to make the rail lines successful. By this point, the stated purpose of building the lines in the first place — to reduce traffic — has become a subordinate concern.

“The goal of these public investments has to be to relieve congestion,” says Laura Lake, of the activist group Fix the City, “not to enable more demand for an already inadequate infrastructure.”

Transit advocates often point to Pasadena as a place where transit-oriented development was done right. The Gold Line, which opened in 2003, spawned high-density residential development in the city’s downtown, building on previous success in transforming Old Pasadena into an attractive shopping destination.

“It’s ‘urban lite,’” says Greg Gunther, a past president of the Downtown Pasadena Residents Association. “With the convenience of the Gold Line right there, you can hop on a train [and] have Sunday brunch downtown or have a bite in South Pasadena.”

But even in Pasadena, where things have gone relatively well, the city was still convulsed for years by heated debates over traffic and density. Most Pasadena homeowners have made their peace with it by now, but it’s still common to hear complaints about traffic tie-ups at the rail crossings on Del Mar or California boulevards.

“I don’t know that it has improved mobility in the city of Pasadena,” says Geoff Baum, president of the West Pasadena Residents Association. “It may not be as bad as it might have been otherwise, but it hasn’t made it better.”

*An earlier version of this story stated that the Neighborhood Integrity Initiative would appear on the November ballot. After publication, the organizers announced they would target the March 2017 ballot instead.*