

Eco-Rapid Transit: Metro Light Rail to Connect Southeast County & DTLA

Tags:

[Michael Kodama](#)/[LA Metro](#)/[los angeles](#)/[Los Angeles County](#)/[Measure M](#)/[Transportation](#)/[public transportation](#)

*A long sought-after “megaproject” in LA Metro’s \$120 billion expansion plan is the West Santa Ana Branch Corridor, a proposed light rail line that would link Downtown Los Angeles to Southeast LA County. The improvement of that underserved corridor is eyed with keen interest by 12 cities and the Hollywood-Burbank Airport, who have joined to manage the project under the Eco-Rapid Transit JPA. TPR asked the JPA’s Executive Director, **Michael Kodama**, to address the possibility of funding the project through P3s, and to explain the line’s economic potential for a transit-dependent area that has endured the loss of manufacturing jobs, alongside heavy industrial pollution and a dearth of mobility options.*

What are the parameters of the West Santa Ana Branch light rail line, and why is Metro currently prioritizing this megaproject?

Michael Kodama: The project area is about 20 miles, extending from Artesia to Union Station-Downtown Los Angeles. In the south, most of the right-of-way is part of what used to be the old Pacific Electric Line known as the West Santa Ana Branch. In the central area, there’s a portion that follows Salt Lake Avenue. From there, it heads up into Downtown Los Angeles.

This project serves an area of Los Angeles County that is, frankly, underserved. It goes through the industrial and manufacturing heart of the county, where a lot of folks don’t have high incomes and have big transit needs. Our preliminary figures show that this line is projected to have a ridership of 80,000 or higher, and at maturity, will rival the ridership of the Blue Line. It will be one of the busiest light rail lines, not only in Los Angeles County, but in the country.

You’ve called this proposal “an economic development project with a rail line through it.” Elaborate.

Luis Marquez, former chair of our organization and former mayor of Downey, used to talk about this at length, and as



Michael Kodama

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we've matured as an organization we've embraced the fact that this project really is about economic development.

It's about connecting communities, creating jobs, and generating opportunities in an area that really needs it. At one time, this area made airplanes; at another time, it made cars. The question is what will be the next big area of production: What is this area going to make next? In order to figure that out, this project creates transportation and mobility access up and down the corridor. For the residents of the area, this is critical, and for future business opportunities, it's just as important.

We think of this project in terms of more than transit; it's about the entire corridor. We're looking at providing access to the activity centers, and whether there are infrastructure needs that we could meet along the way. For example, anyone who drives along the 710 Freeway in this area has had their cell service drop. That's a sign that the cell phone coverage isn't good enough in the area. That's just be one of the infrastructure issues that we could potentially address in the corridor.

For context, inform our readers about the Eco-Rapid Transit Joint Powers Authority that you lead.

The Joint Powers Authority was formed in 2003. It is also known as the Orangeline Development Authority; it was originally envisioned to include both Los Angeles and Orange County. Right now, we have 13 members: 12 cities and the Hollywood-Burbank Airport. It covers many of the cities in Southeast Los Angeles County: Artesia, Bellflower, Paramount, Huntington Park, Downey, Maywood, Bell, South Gate, Vernon and Cudahy; interestingly, Bell Gardens, because of their downtown area close to stations joined in. It also includes the city of Glendale and the Hollywood Burbank Airport to the north.

Even though that northern area is not part of the West Santa Ana Branch, it is still part of having everyone work together along this entire corridor. They see this project as Part One of a multiphase project that could eventually see the line head up into Glendale and to the airport. They see the project will still improve the corridor and create more connectivity among everyone.

What is the status of the rail project in terms of final approval, financing, and completion?

The West Santa Ana Branch project is included in [Measure M](#), and is funded in two parts: The southern portion, from Artesia to the Green Line, is slated to start construction in 2021 and be completed by 2028. The issue is how to go north from there into Downtown Los Angeles; according to Measure M, there has to be a delay where no work is done, and we can't finish the project until much later.

That's why we're excited about working with CEO [Phil Washington](#) and [Dr. Joshua Schank](#) at the Office of Extraordinary Innovation. Metro recently advanced two unsolicited proposals for P3 projects, one of which was the West Santa Ana Branch. We're excited for the opportunity to create a public-private partnership. That could allow this entire project to be built in one phase, and therefore to bring economic development opportunities to the community much sooner. Our communities are also very excited about that, and are very happy that we're being considered as one of the first P3 projects in Los Angeles County.

What are the challenges of getting approval to use the P3 model to accelerate this kind of project?

Oh, boy. There are a lot of challenges. For one, it hasn't been done here in Los Angeles; this is new, and it's always a challenge to do something brand new and be first out the chute. The second challenge is that, even with a P3, there's only a certain amount of money that's allocated. Those are the two biggest ones; it's really about funding.

Putting the whole package together is not easy, either. But we have an advantage, which is that Phil Washington was able to do it in Denver. Between his experience and the experience of his staff, and the enthusiasm of the corridor to push this all together—that's where the opportunity is.

Let's pivot to transit equity with respect to the buildout of the route. Talk about how that plays into the building the corridor.

This project goes smack through areas that are underserved and have low income levels. These areas lost a lot of manufacturing, working class jobs, and they have high unemployment rates. The median income is much lower than in the rest of the county, and density is five or six times the county average. It's a very young population and definitely represents minority communities.

According to [CalEnviroScreen](#), the area includes locations that are in the top 10 percent of Census tracts impacted by environmental injustice. It is an environmental justice issue to bring transit options to these communities.

Weigh in on the issue of declining bus ridership that we're seeing nationally. What might that mean for the \$120 billion effort that Metro is now executing on in Los Angeles, and is it an issue for your corridor?

Part of the issue is that work needs to be done to make transit more attractive—both bus and rail transit. It's not only the time it takes people to travel from one place to another, and not only the cost and convenience: The most important thing, which I was glad to see Metro start working extensively on with the cities of Los

Angeles and Long Beach, is safety. You've got to have a safe and secure system, and you've got to make it so that people of all ages are comfortable.

Gil Peñalosa, who started Ciclovía in Colombia, has an organization called [8 80 Cities](#). I think he's right on with the idea that your transportation system needs to consider eight-year-olds as well as 80-year-olds. I would add that it needs to consider, not only men, but also women. Looking at the entire ridership spectrum goes a lot way.

But in the communities we're talking about, there are still lines to get on the bus. Huntington Park, for one, has some of the most crowded and heavily used bus lines in the entire system. We could use *more* buses in the gateway cities and our corridor.

Let's return to Metro's Office of Extraordinary Innovation. What do you think is the potential of that office for the buildout of our systems?

There are tremendous opportunities with that office; it was a great idea, because there are so many changes taking place all the time—from new safety technologies, to innovations in financing and funding. To me, the question is always how to integrate new ideas and innovation into the system you currently have. For instance, some people would love to see new types of transportation modes. But every time you start one, you've got to think about the operations and maintenance costs. There's a balance to be had.

I also think we need to look outside Los Angeles. We need to think more internationally. I've had the opportunity over the years to see how other systems work, and there are a lot of great ideas out there, throughout the United States and the world. I'd love for the Office of Extraordinary Innovation to start thinking about what people do in other countries, and how we could bring that here.

What is the timeline for realizing the West Santa Ana Branch Transit Corridor?

It's currently in the environmental review phase. Supervisor [Janice Hahn](#) said it right: We want to be riding this line while she is our County Supervisor. That gives us 11 years. To be even more progressive, I'd love to have it in place for the World Cup in 2026 and the Olympics in 2028. So our cities and communities can have an easier time being a part of these events.