

EXTENSIONS TO THE GOLD LINE



Map: Richard Tolmach

Gold Line: A Tale of Two Extensions

LINE TO EAST LOS ANGELES GETS FEDERAL FUNDS

by Roger Christensen

Discussing "phase two" of the Gold Line is often confusing even to Los Angeles residents. There are two separate light rail projects each with completely different political histories and to be built by two different agencies. Both are expansions of the Gold Line and both are often called "Eastbound extensions."

Ultimately, the Gold Line will be a "C-shaped" line passing through Union Station with both northbound and southbound trains that veer east. The MTA project, scheduled to start construction this year, heads south to Little Tokyo and then east through East L.A. to the edge of Montebello. It is called the Metro Gold Line EASTSIDE Extension.

The second project, to be built by the construction authority that built the Pasadena Line, extends east from Pasadena serving cities like Monrovia and Duarte and ultimately connecting with Metrolink in Claremont and may cross into San Bernardino County at Montclair. It is called the Metro Gold Line FOOTHILL Extension.

Here is a quick look at both projects: The Metro Gold Line Eastside Extension has just passed a major milestone as the Feds signed a Full Funding Grant Agreement for \$490 million of the \$898.8 million project just 24 hours before the construction bids were about to expire. The signing allows construction to proceed without a costly rebidding process.

There had been some last minute nail-biting drama as Rep. Ernest Istook Jr. (R-Okla.), head of the powerful House appropriations transportation subcommittee, threatened to hold up a funding agreement for the line because it might jeopardize highway projects in other states. After a few days of heavy Southern California lobbying, he relented.

The Eastside Extension has a long relationship with the Feds going back to when it was originally conceived as a Red Line subway extension that would have ultimately served East L.A.'s commercial Whittier Blvd.

When voters in 1998 shut down the County match to subway construction, several busway or light rail options were studied with the MTA Board ultimately choosing

a light rail on 1st St. and 3rd St. alignment to Atlantic Ave.

The Board unanimously voted, even its former subway critics, to put the 1.7 mile Boyle Heights portion of the 7 mile route underground. It was felt that the narrow pre-automobile street neighborhood of Boyle Heights, perhaps L.A.'s oldest suburb, would have been substantially invaded by a surface busway or light rail line. (And the hope was that Federal money could pay for the subway portion.) Transit dependant East L.A. has seven times the average population density of L.A. County.

Density, however, is a different story with the 24-mile \$1.3 billion Metro Gold Line Foothill Extension. As the former Santa Fe tracks meander through 12 cities on the eastern edge of L.A. County, it is often surprisingly rural.

Most observers believe that the line will have to be built in shorter segments with Irwindale often mentioned as the end of the first segment. Irwindale, though not a large city, offers lots of open land which could provide both a needed rail maintenance yard and massive park-and-ride facilities right off the junction of two major freeways.

Supporters of the line argue that while it doesn't have the density of East L.A., it has the ability to attract new non-transit-dependant "choice riders" who would pull off the freeway to park and ride the rails into Pasadena or Los Angeles.

Coming off the success of a construction authority building the Pasadena Gold Line apart from the MTA, there is considerable local enthusiasm. Although, as Dana Gabbard of Southern California Transit Advocates points out, the lack of identified funding makes the Foothill Extension "much more complicated, yet they act as if the MTA is irrelevant to the process." Congress has given the authority some seed money for studies and they are winding up the public review process for a Draft EIR/EIS.

All cities along the route have drafted support positions in their City Councils but ominous and pricey grade separations and other mitigations are starting to appear - including one city that wants it totally underground.

Dana Gabbard suggests that perhaps there are echoes here from the history of the Blue Line construction to Long Beach that point to one of reasons rail construction costs have been so high in L.A. County. "Every city along the line got pet projects completed as a mitigation. The MTA was blackmailed into paying up to avoid potential political roadblocks."

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