

Pasadena LRT Drama Continues to Finish Line

by Roger Christensen

Perhaps the nail-biting suspense is finally over. In October, the California Public Utilities Commission rejected the appeal of NIMBY organizations who were protesting some of the at-grade crossings of the Pasadena Gold Line. Although they still have the right to appeal to the California State Circuit Court, most observers believe that the Pasadena line's daunting roadblocks are finally history.

Elation greets the changing landscape as long-awaited tracks, canopied station platforms, and catenary poles appear across the alignment, signalling the home stretch to next summer's opening date. A trench for grade separations has been dug under sections of Mt. Washington and downtown Pasadena. A massive elevated segment from Union Station through Chinatown is virtually complete.

This August saw South Pasadena residents in the Mission St. neighborhood gawking in amazement to see a Siemens P2000 light rail vehicle being slowly pushed across the intersection. Two vehicles were delivered to South Pasadena (with more vehicles due this fall in Pasadena and Los Angeles route sections) to provide low-speed clearance testing along the route. The construction is expected to be substantially complete in February. At that time it will be turned over to the MTA for them to begin their operational testing in preparation for a July opening.

Last year, after a ten-year coordinated design effort between the California Public Utilities Commission and the involved transit agencies and cities, the CPUC halted construction segments pending a decision regarding NIMBY protests of at-grade crossings. This year on May 16, the Commission finally ruled in favor of the construction authority and work resumed. The narrow 3-2 vote has raised eyebrows and red flags amongst other agencies that are planning future light rail lines in

California. Even the recent victory over the NIMBY appeal at the PUC was by the same narrow 3-2 margin.

The Pasadena light rail story has been a cliff-hanger since a decade ago when the former Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway line was purchased by the MTA to be double tracked into a light rail line meant to open by 1998. The budget ballooned from \$689.7 million in 1992 to \$998 million in 1995 and the Long Range Plans used state funding assumptions without clear funding sources identified. Construction started, sputtered, then stalled. The MTA organized a task force, using advice from their neighbors in San Diego, to pare down the cost of the project.

Under the violent maelstrom of cost overruns and bad press that characterized the MTA of the mid-1990s, the project was suspended due to a funding shortfall even after \$221 million had already been spent on construction (including a new rail bridge over the Los Angeles River). Then State Senator Adam Schiff came to the rescue with SB 567 which provided state credit guarantees to local transportation projects and SB 1847 which created the single-purpose Los Angeles to Pasadena Blue Line Construction Authority to build the project as a streamlined Joint-Powers-Authority that wouldn't have the overhead costs that burdened the MTA.

SB 1847 wrested away from the MTA only those funds (\$270 million in state and \$88 million in local) that had been programmed for the project. Even with over \$100 million in savings identified with utilizing a low overhead JPA, there still remained a substantial shortfall and strategies like private/public partnerships and bond selling were pursued. In 2000, Gov. Davis' Traffic Congestion Relief Plan identified \$40 million to fill the gap and the project total cost is now \$740 million.

Established in 1999, the Blue Line Construction Authority, [as it is still legally named, even though the route now will be

called the Gold Line when it is operated by MTA] hired Rick Thorpe, who was just completing Salt Lake City's first light rail, as CEO. Future extensions are planned on both ends of the route, which will be called the "Gold Line" when it is operated by the MTA. Under jurisdiction of the Blue Line Authority an extension east from Pasadena to Claremont is being studied. On the L.A. end, MTA has control of a project which threatens to be as contentious as the Pasadena line. (see Subway story below)

BART to SJ Snag

Ambitious expansion plans in Santa Clara County are in trouble, most of all the \$4 billion BART extension designed by Parsons Brinckerhoff. VTA board members are cool to any new sales tax measure on the 2004 ballot, though staff says \$167 million a year more is needed just to keep existing buses and trains running. "I think [voters] would slit our throats," said Sup. Don Gage. "We've gone to the well too many times."

County transit planners believe an additional \$6 billion is needed to fund capital and operations. Existing transit operation already breaks the bank, consuming \$5 million to \$10 million in cash reserves each month despite layoffs, service cuts, fare increases and the canceling of dozens of new projects.

A big part of the problem is that VTA hid the truth about its finances until the day after the November 5 election, in which voters emptied out future transit funding by dedicating it to all to new highways.

At this point, about the only thing that could save rail plans is review by an independent engineering firm with a view towards cost-efficiency, something that has always been lacking in the VTA planning process.

SUBWAY SEGMENTS THREATEN LIGHT RAIL BUDGETS

by Richard F. Tolmach

Ballooning costs at Los Angeles County's Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) are endangering the Agency's control of the region's rail network expansion.

Rail tunneling, for which use of County funds was banned by a voter referendum on public projects following the Hollywood tunnel collapse and methane explosions near the La Brea Tar Pits, has a big role in the burgeoning costs. However, some rail industry observers are concerned that the return of Parsons Brinckerhoff Quade and Douglas (PB) as MTA rail project manager may lie behind the push for other new project features that have added to costs.

The whole episode is reminiscent of PB's spoiler role on the Sacramento LRT project in the 1980's, after it was able to insert one of its engineers as Assistant General Manager inside Sacramento Regional Transit. Until City of Sacramento officials called their bluff by turning off the city spigot, RT managers kept adding unneeded project enhancements and ballooning the cost overrun.

The most outrageous cost is on the East Los Angeles extension of the light rail Gold Line, where PB has helped MTA define light rail as 2 miles of tunnel and 4 miles of surface running. An internal MTA memo leaked to the Los Angeles Times projected that costs for the Eastside Line have risen \$86 million, meaning that the total cost will

approach a billion dollars. That equates to about \$160 million per mile, close to a world record for light rail. The cost increases have enraged local advocates of rail including County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky and State Senator Sheila Keuhl. (D-Santa Monica)

Yaroslavsky, also an MTA board member told the Los Angeles Times, "The MTA is headed for trouble on this one. Our costs are out of line and outpacing not only the national norms, but ... Pasadena." Despite a major bridge across the Los Angeles River and project disruptions by the California Public Utilities Commission, the Pasadena line is being built for \$62 million per mile by a construction authority independent from MTA.

Rail supporters now fear the same cost inflation by MTA contractors may hit the Expo Line next. The MTA memo estimates costs for the new line between Los Angeles with Santa Monica increased \$202 million since last year. The new cost estimates put the price for the first segment of the Expo Line to Culver City at \$632 million. In the case of the Expo Line, still being engineered and three years from the start of construction, the new projection worries officials. The line should be a cost-effective, predictable project because it uses an existing right of way and runs almost entirely at street level.

Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, another Los Angeles County supervisor whose district includes the Expo Line, said she was disturbed that the railway costs have risen so

much since the MTA board approved the project last summer. Ironically, Burke has spoken out in favor of rescinding the ban on County funds for tunneling.

The University of Southern California's desire for a rail tunnel may have influenced the cost inflation. Proposition 51, rejected by voters Nov. 5 had funds for a USC tunnel. MTA is also considering grade-separating four intersections on Exposition Blvd, which could increase costs by up to \$80 million.

For those who have watched the same thing happen elsewhere, the cost increase methods are familiar. MTA doubled its estimates for engineering, consulting and extra staffing costs. It quadrupled its contingency costs, a sure sign of poor management. The price for rail construction is up six-fold. Light rail cars are estimated to be about \$4.7 million per copy, double what other cities pay. Notably lacking is any focus on cost control.

Yaroslavsky has apparently had enough. He calls MTA's designs too lavish, and says the agency also unduly pads its staff budget requests. He believes the answer is to create another turnkey authority like the Pasadena one, to rip control away from MTA and PB. He asked Sen. Sheila Keuhl, for legislation to do that. Keuhl, a longtime supporter of Expo Rail, said she will consider it. "I was shocked to see how costs have gone up," she told the Times. "These cost increases make you think there is almost some agenda to keep the line from being built."