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Los Angeles County OKs transportation jobs program

Officials say the plan will create thousands of jobs for those who need them most on upcoming projects.

By Ari Bloomekatz, Los Angeles Times

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Moving to deliver on their promise to create thousands of jobs with proceeds from a voter-approved tax for transportation projects, Los Angeles County officials Thursday approved a sweeping employment program.

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Officials say it will dramatically increase the number of workers hired from communities near upcoming transit projects expected to cost at least \$10 million. Special attention will be given to applicants who live in areas of high unemployment.

"We are demonstrating that we are serious about job creation and job opportunity, and jobs that are good-paying jobs with benefits that support families," said county Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, who is also on the Metropolitan Transportation Authority board that approved the measure, 11-1. The opposing vote came from Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich, who said he preferred studying a limited system before expanding.

Thursday's vote authorizes Metro to negotiate the labor agreements. Those negotiations will require, among other things, that at least 30% of the workers live locally and that at least 10% come from communities hit especially hard by the recession or who face hardships such as homelessness or chronic unemployment.

If a labor dispute were to arise during a project, program workers would be barred from going on strike and their employers would be prevented from locking them out.

The first project required to follow the policy is the \$1.7-billion Crenshaw/LAX Line that will run 8 1/2 miles from the Expo Line along Crenshaw Boulevard, through South L.A. and Inglewood, and end at the Green Line near LAX.

The Metro board Thursday approved the line's final environmental documents — amid threats of lawsuits from residents and an impassioned plea from L.A. City Councilman Bill Rosendahl to add a station in Westchester — and hopes it will be completed by 2018.

Funding for many of the agency's rail and other projects will come from Measure R, the half-cent sales tax for transportation projects approved in 2008. Backers had promised that it would also create jobs.

"We ought to reward the people who paid the half-penny sales tax," said Metro board chairman and L.A. Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa. "Because any time you shop for anything, you're paying part of the tax that will double the size of this rail system and will invest in repair in our roads. You ought to benefit.... There's a depression today in the construction industry, and we're here to change that."

Maria Elena Durazo, executive secretary-treasurer of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, AFL-CIO, gave a thumbs-up and took photographs with union workers who attended Thursday's meeting at Metro's downtown headquarters, some carrying resumes just in case.

"What we stand for today is good jobs, good jobs, good jobs," Durazo said. "And it's not enough to say we're going to create jobs. We want them for the people who need them most in our region."

The program comes in the wake of recent data marking the third straight year of increases to the county's poverty rate, which rose from just under 15% in 2007 to 17.5% in 2010. Reports also showed that construction workers able to find employment in their industry fell 8.8% between 2009 and 2010. Anthony Mitchell Jr., 47, an out-of-work electrician from Sylmar, said the Metro program provides hope for steady employment, a living wage and health benefits for him and his family.

"This is the hardest time that I've seen since I have been in the building trades," Mitchell said, adding that he has been able to find work only about one-third of each of the last several years and was facing foreclosure on his home.

"The sad part about it," Mitchell said, "is I am not alone."

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