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In Los Angeles, Big Step Ahead for Mass Transit

By ADAM NAGOURNEY

LOS ANGELES — This auto-obsessed city — a place where people love their cars almost as much as they hate the traffic — has embarked on the biggest expansion of its mass transit system in decades, an effort to change the way people navigate its sprawling and clogged streets and freeways.

Los Angeles transit officials, after years of debate, have approved an 8.6-mile extension of the Purple Line subway, from Koreatown through a crowded corridor of offices, homes, museums, schools and shopping centers in Beverly Hills, Century City and Westwood.

What once seemed a quixotic vision — the “Subway to the Sea,” connecting Union Station in downtown to the Pacific Ocean in Santa Monica — no longer seems quite so quixotic.

At the same time, Los Angeles received \$546 million from the federal government to build, over the next 10 years, an 8.5-mile above-ground light-rail line from the Crenshaw district to Los Angeles International Airport.

An 11-mile extension of the Metro Gold Line, which starts in East Los Angeles and will eventually go out to Montclair, began in June, and construction is set to begin this year extending the Exposition Light Rail Line from Culver City to Santa Monica.

Taken together, these developments have emboldened mass transit enthusiasts here and lent credibility to what has become something of a legacy project for Mayor [Antonio R. Villaraigosa](#), who ran for office pledging to build a transit system that would upend long-established commuting habits and ease what has long been a bane of life in Los Angeles.

“This put to rest all this talk of, ‘Will we ever build a subway?’ ” Mr. Villaraigosa said, somewhat triumphantly, in an interview. “This is a big deal. People have been talking about it for years. And they were making fun of me: ‘Where is the subway?!’ ”

Los Angeles once had a large, intricate and thriving public transportation system, with so-called Yellow Car trolleys that ran on downtown streets and a vast network of Red Cars, operated by the Pacific Electric Railroad, that ran throughout the region. This was dismantled amid the city’s fervent embrace of the automobile (encouraged, in no small part, by oil interests in Los Angeles that realized the economic potential of the car).

But with a vote by the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transit Authority’s board last month to approve the Purple Line expansion, there is a consensus that these projects are going to be built, even among those who describe them as a waste of money in a region that will never embrace mass transit. The projects are being financed by a half-cent sales tax surcharge approved by Los Angeles voters two years ago and expected to raise \$40 billion over the next 30 years.

Not to say that there aren’t battles left to be fought.

Beverly Hills officials oppose a proposed stretch of the Purple Line because it would burrow under a public high school; they want the line moved a few blocks north. That has its own complications: skirting the high school would put the subway cheek by jowl against an earthquake fault that runs down Santa Monica Boulevard.

“We very much want the Subway to the Sea, but we are very strongly against the high school route,” said Jimmy Delshad, the mayor of Beverly Hills.

Most immediately, the Republican takeover of the United States House this month threatens to undermine a fiscal maneuver pressed by Mr. Villaraigosa in Washington to accelerate construction of the projects. The mayor had asked the federal government to give an advance loan against those sales tax revenues, allowing the work to be done in 10 years, an idea that seemed to be gaining steam until Election Day.

“Let’s face it, after the midterm election we’re in a new world,” said Joel Epstein, a mass transit advocate.

Representative [Henry A. Waxman](#), the Democrat who represents the area, said he hoped Republicans would not block a plan that, he argued, would create jobs, improve the transit system and not cost the federal government a significant sum of money.

“This is the kind of idea that some Republicans may even find attractive,” Mr. Waxman said. “It’s tremendously important. I see that whenever I’m at home and in my car: it’s just terrible traffic.”

Still, the most intriguing question may be whether a place that has so embraced the culture of cars — and, with its sprawl, could not be more different from subway-friendly cities like New York, London and Paris — will make the kind of lifestyle adjustment envisioned by mass transit enthusiasts. There were an average of 295,000 daily riders on the 79 miles of subway and light-rail lines in October, and 1.2 million on city buses.

Tom Rubin, a mass transit consultant in Oakland, called the subway project fiscal folly that would serve only to take resources away from the widely used, if less efficient, network of buses.

“They have been pushing rail expansion for decades now,” Mr. Rubin said, “and it has not had much of an impact in terms of increasing transit ridership. The big problem is that these are very, very expensive, and we wind up spending so much money on building these rail lines that there is not enough to operate bus service. So we wind up cutting back on bus operations and then raising fares,

which drives the riders away.”

Robert B. Cervero, the director of the [University of California](#) Transportation Center in Berkeley, said that if the subway expansion cut commuting time as promised, it would indeed change ridership habits. Transit officials said the ride from Koreatown to Westwood by subway would take 24 minutes, compared with 50 minutes during the rush in a car or on a bus.

“The science of public transit is not too complicated,” Mr. Cervero said in an e-mail message. “It comes down to how time-competitive transit is with the private car. If it takes two to three times longer to get from Point A to Point B by transit, the vast majority of folks will drive. If it’s faster going by bus or train, then most will forsake their car and ride transit.”

Mr. Epstein said that changing demographics and population patterns — and ever-rising frustration over traffic — would inevitably drive people from cars underground.

“There’s a whole new type of Angeleno who has no cultural opposition to riding,” he said. “The whole old-school L.A. thinking that people don’t ride subways, that’s a thing of the past.”



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