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South Bay's 'Unused jewel' eyed for mass transit line

Train tracks along Harbor Subdivision might eventually be used by the MTA to connect to LAX and beyond.

By Dan Laidman

Copley News Service

For decades, freight trains rumbled regularly from the Port of Los Angeles to the rail yards of downtown over 27.6 miles of tracks cutting through the heart of the South Bay.

Then the Alameda Corridor opened in 2002 and took much of that traffic away. The old right of way -- known as the Harbor Subdivision -- went from 20 train trips a day to barely a handful.

Transportation planners have long suspected that the route could have a second life as a mass transit line connecting South Bay commuters to the rest of the region, and now officials are taking the first steps toward making that a reality.

While a Harbor Subdivision mass transit line is still only speculation, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority embarked on an analysis this summer of what transportation options might be possible on the route.

"I'm just delighted that we're beginning to look at these existing right of ways and how we can make them more effective for mass transit," Los Angeles City Councilman Bill Rosendahl said. "I think the energy's there now, I think the commitment is there now, I think the political leadership is there now, and now is the time to act."

Several factors have spurred the MTA to take a new look at the Harbor Subdivision, which one of its predecessor agencies purchased from the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway in 1992. Worsening traffic in the region has encouraged officials to put a new focus on mass transit, and the election of Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa brought a new emphasis on public transportation to the MTA.

Data on right of way

Meanwhile, the Transit Coalition advocacy group has prodded officials about the Harbor Subdivision at every opportunity. The organization maintains an extensive archive of information about the right of way on its Web site, thetransitcoalition.us.

"It's an unused jewel," said Bart Reed, executive director of the group. "It's a gem of the transportation system that hasn't been recognized by the community."

Reed envisions an extension of the Metrolink regional rail system along the right of way. It would

provide South Bay commuters with a link to jobs all around Southern California, he said, and spare them increasingly long and costly car trips.

"The South Bay has been an orphan to fast public transportation," he said. "It's been left out of the mix."

Planners at the MTA caution that the Harbor Subdivision is not even included in their current long-term plan, so any mass transit line there could be two decades or more away.

"Right now we're just looking at it from a technical feasibility analysis of what you could do on that line and what you couldn't do for that line," said Renee Berlin, director for the agency's South Bay area planning team.

Planners are looking at various types of mass transit, Berlin said, including regional rail similar to Metrolink, light rail such as the Green and Blue lines or a busway like the Orange Line.

The Harbor Subdivision presents a unique challenge to planners because it stretches through a variety of different environments, from densely urban downtown Los Angeles to the fringes of Los Angeles International Airport, the residential and commercial stretches of Torrance, Lawndale, Carson and an industrial part of Wilmington.

Also, while most rail activity has shifted east to the Alameda Corridor, BNSF Railway still runs a few trains each day along the northern and southern parts of the Harbor Subdivision under an agreement that dates back to the sale of the right of way.

"As long as we're still able to do that we'll work cooperatively on their plans," said Lena Kent, a spokeswoman for the company, who added that BNSF shares some routes with Metrolink.

Around Councilman Rosendahl's office, the Harbor Subdivision has the nickname "The LAX Express." The Westchester-area representative said he likes the idea of regional rail on the Harbor Subdivision because it could relieve LAX-area traffic congestion by bringing in passengers by public transportation, and by sending travelers from Los Angeles to airports in Ontario and Palmdale, which are near Metrolink stops.

Hahn favors idea

Harbor Area Councilwoman Janice Hahn also favors mass transit along the Harbor Subdivision.

"I think the whole Harbor Area is disconnected from good mass transit," she said. "This would connect Wilmington eventually to the Green Line, so I think this is a good rail line to connect the Harbor Area."

Both Hahn and Rosendahl believe commuter rail on the Harbor Subdivision would complement local light rail along an extended Green Line.

Transit type weighed

Jacki Bacharach, executive director of the South Bay Council of Governments, favors some type of

mass transit on the right of way, but is not yet sure what type would be best.

"It's got a real great connection to the whole regional system, so to use it for that would be very effective," she said. "But it also could connect Inglewood to Torrance and other South Bay areas."

Transportation planners expect to wrap up their technical analysis of the Harbor Subdivision in three to four months.

The MTA board has already allocated \$100,000 for a second study.

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