

# Gold Line extension gets low priority from SanBAG

By Liset Marquez, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin  
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A move by a San Bernardino Associated Governments' subcommittee to give low priority to the Gold Line extension – postponing funding for several years – is drawing criticism.

SanBAG is being short-sighted when it prioritized its rail projects through 2040, postponing Gold Line-related projects at least until 2016 when additional funds could become available, critics say.

Funding is based on the estimated \$1.5 billion in revenue available during the span of Measure I, a San Bernardino County sales-tax measure for transportation projects.

The Commuter Rail and Transit subcommittee has agreed to give the Redlands Passenger Rail Project priority, followed by plans to double-track portions of Metrolink. The panel's recommendation now goes to the SanBAG board for final approval.

Ray Wolfe, the executive director of the transportation planning agency for the county, said setting aside any funds now for the Gold Line would delay projects such as the Redlands Passenger Rail, which is only years away from construction.

"It boils down to an issue of money here in San Bernardino County. We have a limited amount of money that we can use on rail projects," he said.

Measure I only sets aside 8 percent for rail projects. Annually, the money collected from Measure I for rail projects is between \$8 million and \$9 million. At that pace, collecting \$55 million for the light rail line would take more than six years. But that money also must be shared with a rail project in Redlands.

The Metro Gold Line Foothill Extension Construction Authority board met this week and were not pleased to learn of SanBAG's recommendation.

"We believe stalling the process is not good for anybody," said Ontario Mayor Paul Leon, who is a member of the construction authority board. "We are frustrated, but these kinds of decisions from a committee are specifically pushed by staff."

Montclair City Manager Edward Starr criticized the agency for being unable to recognize the Gold Line project's importance not only to his town but the entire county.

"SanBAG should not back down on this," he said.

It was only less than a year ago that Wolfe spoke to members of the Montclair City Council stating his support for the light rail project.

"It's almost embarrassing if SanBAG doesn't stand behind that now," he said.

But the uncertainty of when funds will become available to bring the light rail line past Azusa is what Wolfe said concerns him about SanBAG investing in the project at this time.

"The board remains committed to bringing the Gold Line to Montclair," he said, but it's a question of when.

Funding to bring the light rail beyond Azusa to Claremont has been met with its own hurdles. Construction is underway to extend the Gold Line from east Pasadena to Azusa. The next portion, if approved, would take

the route to Claremont and Montclair.

In June, the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority came up with its own 30-year list of projects for Measure R sales-tax funding, excluding the Gold Line from the inventory.

Transportation planning officials are waiting to see if Measure R gets extended in 2016 and if the ballot would include the Gold Line extension.

“When I look at prioritizing the numbers of projects, we need to focus on the project that will have the biggest benefit to the tax-paying public and to bring to fruition at the earliest possible time,” Wolfe said.

An environmental report on the light rail phase stretching from Azusa to Montclair projects the cost will be \$950 million, but no source of funding has been identified.

The one-mile route from Claremont to Montclair is expected to cost SanBAG \$55 million and require \$3 million annually to operate and maintain. It will take another \$450 million to take it from Montclair to L.A./Ontario International Airport.

Because the project is mainly focused on the West End of the county, Starr said he knows the Gold Line extension coming to Montclair is not a priority for every city in San Bernardino County, but the eventual link to the airport will be key in the future.

“The airport is vital to the economic success to this county and the Gold Line could be effective in bringing air commuters. The Gold Line would serve as an alternative against LAX,” Starr said.

Starr said he would prefer SanBAG at least place the Gold Line project second on the list, to at least give it a chance for funding, considering that the Gold Line Construction Authority is seeking \$2 million this year from SanBAG for a preliminary study.

Despite the lack of financial support, Gold Line Construction Authority officials remain committed to bringing it to Claremont, Leon said.

“People in the San Gabriel Valley understand the value of connecting to Ontario airport and are willing to step up and invest more to complete the project as originally intended,” Leon said. “We’re not going to stop. We still have a vision and a goal that we are going to accomplish and SanBAG is going to have to catch up.”

The construction authority agreed to issue a request for organizations to analyze what it will take to extend the Gold Line to ONT.

“The end game, in our lifetime, is for the Gold Line light rail to end at a location in very close proximity to ONT airport,” Leon said. “It’s what makes sense.”

Ultimately, Starr said, SanBAG “does need to stand up to the plate,” and find the funds for the 8-mile, \$55 million portion of the Gold Line in San Bernardino County.

Starr said he would even entertain the idea of loaning SanBAG \$2 million for the work necessary this year,

As of Thursday, Starr said he was drafting a letter to Wolfe to “at least get a dialogue going between ourselves on how he might approach them on this issue.”

The Redlands Passenger Rail Project, a 9-mile route, would extend Metrolink service from downtown San

Bernardino to the University of Redlands as early as 2017.

There would be stops by Esri, one by the Krikorian Redlands Cinema 14 and one at the University of Redlands.

Officials expect to issue a request for proposals for the final design of the project early this year.

When completed, officials expect it will increase ridership on Metrolink's San Bernardino line by at least 10 percent.

"We're focusing on projects we can bring to fruition and benefit the traveling public as soon as possible," Wolfe said.

Second on the list, the Metrolink San Bernardino Line Capacity Expansion, would add double tracks in portions of Los Angeles and San Bernardino counties. The plan would be to add tracks near the Upland-Claremont area and then another segment in Fontana near Rancho Cucamonga, Wolfe said.

SanBAG's board is expected to review the subcommittee's prioritization on the rail projects at a meeting Feb. 5.