

# CITY BEAT

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FRONTLINES

## L.A. Sniper: Subway Fibs and Felonies

The mayor tries to rewrite history with the help of his patsy at the Times

~ By ALAN MITTELSTAEDT ~



Photo by Gary Leonard

~ Sweet ride, Antonio, but pick us up before 2011 ~

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ayor Antonio Villaraigosa blew it last week and missed yet another chance to make political progress on the road to fixing a subway system deformed by racism and lack of vision. He didn't even choose the right venue for his news conference. And, to make it worse, the Los Angeles Times reverted to its propaganda-mode default position and helped him get away with some revisionist history.

The occasion was heralding the lifting of the congressional ban on federal money to build subways west of Fairfax. The 1986 ban was masterminded by Congressman Henry Waxman, who seized upon unfounded methane worries to appease constituents who feared the subway would bring people of color to their white neighborhoods. Now, those

same constituents are stuck in Westside gridlock and wonder and curse, of course, why the subway wasn't built 20 years ago.

You'd think the mayor would at least have held the news conference at the Wilshire/Western station, the dead-end stub of the Purple Line subway, amid hundreds of people rushing to continue their westward journey by stealing aisle space on the standing-room only 720 Rapid bus. He could have drafted commuters and made them poster children for his upcoming campaign to finish the Subway to the Sea. What could be a better image for resting blame upon the shoulders of all – including Waxman and County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky – for allowing evil forces and political grandstanding two decades ago to interfere with creating a mass transit system that people are howling for now. The scene at the end-of-the-line station could have put them and all of L.A. officialdom on the spot to move a solution for this capital crime against commuters to the fast lane.

Instead, the mayor showed up at Union Station with four councilmembers, including his surrogate Jack Weiss, whose last independent thought probably occurred around the time the last rails for the Red Car were torn up. They stood 100 feet or so from the escalators leading to the Red Line. Tom LaBonge talked up his \$52-a-year parcel tax to raise money for transit and Weiss again pushed a private-public partnership, with the blessings of the mayor, who also said it was time for Sacramento and Washington to come up with some money. Only LaBonge had taken public transportation to the 10:15 a.m. news conference. Talk about missed opportunities.

They just as well could have convened this lovefest on the shoulder of the 10 freeway, and brought along a priest or two, and confessed that even if they were to do their best, construction on the first leg from Wilshire/Western to Century City won't begin before 2011.

The mayor's goal for this news conference seems so small: All he wants is some TV time to show he's out there talking up the public's No. 1 issue – traffic – even if he's not doing enough about it. He breaks about as much news as a Steve Jobs during a Super Bowl commercial. He provides as much insight and analysis as a member of the Manson clan during a perfunctory parole board hearing. He sounds like Neil Armstrong, though it should be easier to build a subway to Santa Monica than land on the moon: "We're here to celebrate a small step for Washington, D.C., but a big step for Los Angeles commuters. Twenty-one years ago, Washington derailed the hopes of a Westside subway. Today we're back on track." As is the case at most mayoral events, L.A. Sniper was more fascinated by the leaders absent from the podium than the ones present, and by what wasn't said rather than the self-serving speeches.

If the mayor wants to make progress on the subway, he needs Yaroslavsky to lead a campaign to repeal the 1998 ban on using sales tax money to help fund subway projects. At the time, the ban made sense because the MTA was rife with corruption and mismanagement. The mayor should have been working with Zev, in the same way that he and others held Waxman's hand over the methane issue, so that we'd have an agreement in place for the county supervisor to lead the campaign to repeal the ban. We asked the mayor why no county supervisors were present, or why they hadn't sent along any messages of support. "The Board of Supervisors support this subway almost to the person. We're going to work with them and all of our colleagues to move ahead with this project."

And, of course, the obvious question is what good does it do to lift the ban on federal money without a plan in place to actually win federal money for the project. So, L.A. Sniper wanted to know what it will take to get Henry Waxman standing at the podium to announce that he will fight for a subway with the same intensity that he shows in his campaigns against the crimes of the Bush administration.

Here's what the mayor said about Henry: "He called and said he's in Washington, obviously doing his job. We thank him for that. He's doing a great job, by the way, and he would have been here otherwise. He had to be in Washington."

Pretty lame, Mr. Mayor. Here we are in the holidays and no time could be found when the congressman would be in his district and could drop by the Wilshire/Western station for what would be a historic news conference? The man who crushed L.A.'s subway dreams two decades ago, making peace with modern-day voters and also the legacies of Mayor Tom Bradley and Congressman Julian Dixon, L.A.'s last true congressional champion.

Speaking of lame, L.A. Times' Steve Hymon should be tougher on the mayor, instead of engaging in fake chumminess. The mayor calls him Stevie and said he was raining on his parade by asking why the mayor hadn't yet developed a funding plan for the subway. The mayor responded that Tom Bradley promised a subway in 18 months, but it took him 18 years to deliver. Of course, when Bradley uttered those remarks, most of Los Angeles thought he was crazy. Talk of the subway in the 1980s provoked the same disbelief that County Supervisor Mike Antonovich's monorail chatter still elicits today. Hymon, in his Monday column in the Times, caved in to the mayor: "This, in fact, is a very fair point for the mayor to make."

You were duped, Steve. You could at least have criticized the mayor for failing to get Zev on board to repeal the Measure A ban. Maybe you don't want to rile things up, or

maybe your scared-of-their-shadows editors won't let you write the truth. But don't be a patsy and allow the mayor, or a mistaken congressman, to rewrite history. The Waxman ban was not a simple matter of safety concerns prompted by the methane explosion at the Ross Dress for Less in the Fairfax district in 1985. Waxman's constituents did not want the subway built, and he used that as a convenient excuse to force the Red Line to be diverted north of what is now L.A.'s most congested thoroughfare, Wilshire Boulevard. Methane was not at the core of the congressman's ban: Even Yaroslavsky and Supervisor Yvonne Burke have repeatedly said so, and the editorial pages of your own paper, of all places, often gets this one right.

We know the mayor's heart is in the right place on transit issues. Here are a few New Year's resolutions to make sure his mind is there, too:

Cancel all of your New Year's Eve party plans. We don't want you to get into any trouble anyways. Instead, make a dinner date with Zev at the Water Grill. And, be flexible. If he can only do lunch, take him to Musso and Frank. You can both take the Red Line to the Hollywood/Highland station and walk a couple blocks to the restaurant. Catch up on all the pleasantries about how happy you'd be if he doesn't run for mayor against you in 18 months. But don't pick up the tab until he promises to stand with you, shoulder to shoulder –don't expect him to jump into your pocket like a Jack Weiss – at a news conference and announce he will lead the campaign to ask voters to once again allow sales tax money to help pay for subway projects in Los Angeles.

By the end of January, abduct Henry Waxman, if that's what it takes, and drag him to a press conference at the Wilshire/Western station to announce his full-fledged support for federal money to pay part of the \$5 billion tab for the subway to the sea. If you can't force him, and he is unavailable in the same way that he couldn't attend the Dec. 20 gathering at Union Station, remember the advice that Zev shared with you at your New Year's Eve dinner: Dispatch a delegation of officials and community leaders, such as ex-Santa Monica Mayor Denny Zane, to lobby him and convince him that it's the only way to remove the blemish from his record created by his 1986 racist ban on subway money.

Make sure you personally attend the Jan. 10 conversation on transit funding being organized by Denny Zane, the former mayor of Santa Monica. L.A.'s best hope of moving this subway to the fast track – and developing a plan to pay for a region-wide network – is collaborating with some of the best minds in Southern California, inside and outside of city halls and the county hall of administration. ★

*Send insults and ammo to [BigAl@lasniper.com](mailto:BigAl@lasniper.com).*

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