

\$22 million approved for pedestrian tunnel under Lankershim Boulevard in NoHo to take commuters between Metro Orange Line and Red Line stations

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Money to build a \$22-million tunnel connecting the North Hollywood Orange and Red Line stations was approved Thursday, saving thousands of commuters from crossing a busy street.

The U.S. Department of Transportation is expected Friday to formally announce the \$10 million allocation for the pedestrian link beneath Lankershim Boulevard

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority committed the rest. Construction, expected to generate 400 jobs, could begin in March and end in Spring 2014.

"This job-creating transit project can now go from the drawing board to reality, while increasing safety for Valley transit riders," Rep. Howard Berman, D-Van Nuys, who made urgent requests for the funds, said in a statement.

The long-awaited project would create a 150-foot underground passage from the Orange Line bus platform to the below-ground Red Line subway mezzanine.

Essentially, a second Red Line entrance would be built north of Chandler Boulevard, allowing Orange Line transfers to cross under Lankershim Boulevard.

Since the Orange Line opened in 2005, daily commuters have been forced to cross Lankershim in droves.

"This is huge -- huge," said Bart Reed, executive director of The Transit Coalition, a bus and rail advocate based in Sylmar. "It's a game changer.

"Because it really makes going by train, or having to take the bus, hassle free -- of not having dangerous cars, or waiting for the signal to change."

It was in March that the MTA announced plans to build the pedestrian tunnel. When the Red Line terminus was built, "knockout panels" were installed in the station for such an expansion.

In April, Berman and U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., appealed for a Department of Transportation grant.

Only when the DOT handed out \$500 million for up to 50 projects from its so-called TIGER funds last June, Southern California got short shrift.

So Berman -- engaged in a hotly contested race for the newly created 30th Congressional District against Rep. Brad Sherman -- whipped off another missive to transportation Secretary Ray LaHood.

The Valley would be seeing a surge of riders between the new MTA Orange Line extension to Chatsworth and the Red Line to Union Station, he wrote.

In June, the Orange Line packed 24,000 daily weekday riders onto its buses -- with an estimated 16,000 passengers using the Lankershim crosswalk, according to the MTA.

By 2030, Orange Line busway riders were expected to swell to 45,000, with most expected to transfer over to the Red Line.

This time, Uncle Sam listened.

The DOT granted \$10 million to the MTA from a federal Bus and Bus Facility fund, Berman said. And the MTA pledged \$12 million to complete the tunnel.

"We cheer the amount of money for this project," said Dave Sotero, a spokesman for the MTA. "It's the missing link between the Orange and Red lines."

Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, a champion for the Orange Line, agreed.

"My many thanks go to Congressman Howard Berman, because he delivered when no one else could," Yaroslavsky told the Daily News. "It's huge. It's long overdue."

"This'll make it a lot easier, and safer, to transfer from the Orange to the Red Line ... you will now be able to go from one to the other without waiting for a traffic signal," he said. "It'll save commuters time. It'll save drivers time."

"It's a win-win." dana.bartholomew@dailynews.com
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