MTA presenting options for easing traffic crush in Sepulveda Pass

**By Christina Villacorte Staff Writer**

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With traffic routinely choking the Sepulveda Pass, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority will present San Fernando Valley residents Wednesday with several ideas for easing the congestion, ranging from adding new lanes alongside or above the 405 Freeway, to building a tunnel through the Santa Monica Mountains.

In all, six concepts will be presented at the year’s first meeting of Metro’s San Fernando Valley Service Council, though none are expected to be financed until 2039 — unless private investors decide to pitch in.

All would provide commuters with relief from traffic, to varying degrees, according to a report that Metro transportation planners will present at the meeting on Wednesday.

"Study Concepts could accommodate increases in travel through the Sepulveda Pass of between 11 percent and 29 percent," the report said.

The Sepulveda Pass Corridor extends 30 miles, from the San Fernando Valley to LAX. The initial phase of the project would focus on the Sepulveda Pass, where drivers have complained of spending an hour or longer in traffic just to travel 10 miles on the 405 between the 10 and 101 freeways.

Metro’s cost estimates for the six concepts range from about $160 million to more than $30.7 billion.

Concept 1 calls for adding a dedicated busway on the shoulder of the 405 Freeway in the Sepulveda Pass that would continue onto Van Nuys and Sepulveda Boulevards in the San Fernando Valley and the Westside.

Concept 2 would build express lanes for vehicles with three or more passengers from the San Fernando Valley to LAX, at a cost of about $1.7 billion. It would accommodate a rapid bus transit system.

This has the potential to attract private investors, who could get their money back by charging a toll on the express lanes.

Concept 3 would create a $2.3-billion aerial viaduct above the median of the 405 Freeway in the Sepulveda Pass. There would be express lanes on the viaduct, and a dedicated busway beneath it.

Bart Reed, executive director of The Transit Coalition, which advocates for efficient transportation systems, dubbed the first three ideas "absurd" and "silly," saying they would not make much of a dent in easing congestion.

Concept 4 calls for building a $10-billion toll highway tunnel through the Sepulveda Pass, with two lanes going in either direction.

Of all the ideas, this has the highest potential for easing congestion, and could attract private investors who can provide financing that would enable construction to begin decades sooner than currently planned.

Metro estimates an average of 510,000 people travel through the Sepulveda Pass on weekdays. Adding a toll highway tunnel would increase that number to 655,000.

The final concepts call for building a railway tunnel through the Santa Monica Mountains.

Concept 5 would make that tunnel accommodate either a $7.4-billion light-rail system or a $13.6 billion heavy-rail system.

By far the most expensive of all, Concept 6 proposes building a $30.7-billion tunnel that would have both a highway and a railway inside it.

This is also a potential public-private partnership, with tolls that can be based on demand pricing.

Reed endorsed building a railway through the Sepulveda Pass, noting "it gives the public the choice not to use a

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“We want something that’s direct and will accommodate more people, and the train system would provide that type of solution,” he said. “Also, it would give the freeway more capacity as people leave their cars and take the train instead.”

For now, Metro has $1 billion allotted for the Sepulveda Pass Corridor project, thanks to a half-percent sales tax that voters approved in 2008. That money, however, would not be available until 2039.

Want to go?

The San Fernando Valley Service Council meets 6:30 p.m. Wednesday at the Marvin Braude Constituent Center, 6262 Van Nuys Blvd., Van Nuys.

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I support Concept 5 with a “heavy rail” tunnel (est $10B). What good is an additional lane or express lane on the 405 for buses, cars or toll-ways? Agree with Bart Reed that we need to provide an alternative to cars...to those who wish to avoid the freeway altogether...and take public transportation. The Red Line works great. A public/private partnership starting ASAP may be the way to go...and completion before 2039 is much needed.

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