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From the Los Angeles Times

Work begins on light-rail line from downtown to Westside

Major construction on the first 8.6 miles of the route is a milestone, but questions on its usefulness persist.

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August 11, 2007

Standing amid mounds of dirt at the edge of USC on Friday, political leaders celebrated a milestone for L.A.'s fledgling rail system: the start of major construction for a rail line from downtown to the Westside.

But like so many mass transit projects in Los Angeles County, the Expo Line was shaped by three decades of political squabbling and compromises that raise questions about whether it can achieve the goal of getting Westsiders out of their cars and onto mass transit.

The first 8.6-mile leg of the line will run from the 7th Street/Metro Center station in the heart of downtown to Culver City. But it will be nowhere near many of the Westside's most congested destinations, including the Miracle Mile, Grove-Beverly Center areas, Beverly Hills, West Hollywood, Century City and Westwood/UCLA.

Instead, it will move along an old Southern Pacific rail line through relatively quieter southwest L.A., roughly following Exposition Boulevard. The route avoided heavy opposition from community groups and reduced costs, which will be at least \$640 million. The line is supposed to start operations in 2010.

As a result of that route, officials expect the Expo Line to Culver City to see 43,000 passenger boardings every weekday by 2025. (A boarding is a one-way trip.)

Officials point out that ridership estimates would jump -- perhaps to 72,000 weekday boardings -- if the Expo Line is extended about seven miles west to Santa Monica, which would make it the second-most heavily traveled light-rail line in the county after the Blue Line. But transit officials expressed concerns about whether more than \$800 million can be found to fund the last leg, particularly at a time when the state has proposed major cuts in transportation funding.

"In order for this to be a total success, it has to get to Santa Monica," said Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky.

The MTA has already been struggling with rail lines that have not quite worked out.

The Green Line does not hit major destinations such as Los Angeles International Airport and the South Bay Galleria mall near its route, but instead goes from Norwalk to a miniature golf course in north Redondo Beach.

The Gold Line from downtown to Pasadena has also been a disappointment, largely because it runs close to residential neighborhoods and hits so many street crossings that taking the train is significantly slower than driving.

For safety reasons, the state Public Utilities Commission restricted the speed of Gold Line trains in parts of South Pasadena and Highland Park. Expo Line trains may suffer some of the same problems as they cross major north-south streets, such as Vermont, Normandie and Western avenues and Crenshaw Boulevard, and may have to slow as they approach intersections, experts said.

"They're going to have to stop pretty frequently at signalized intersections," said James E. Moore, director of USC's transportation engineering program. Traffic lights can be synchronized to give the trains a priority, but they would still have to slow down, Moore said.

The result is that a ride on the Expo Line from downtown to Culver City won't be much faster than a bus trip, said Genevieve Giuliano, director of the National Center for Metropolitan Transportation Research at USC.

"A surface rail line has to stop at traffic signals and is interfered with by surface traffic. It really doesn't have any advantage over a bus traveling the same route," Giuliano said.

A ride along the full length of the Expo Line to Culver City is expected to be "under 30 minutes," while a westbound Commuter Express bus on Route 437, which follows a different course between the same two points, takes 25 minutes on a Friday afternoon, according to the bus schedule.

"Unless it's faster and more frequent than what's there, it's not going to be measurably better," Giuliano said.

Expo Line backers say that on the congestion-plagued Westside, some motorists will gladly use rail if it becomes available.

"The heaviest congestion is between the 405 [Freeway] and the ocean because of the job-rich areas of Santa Monica, Playa Vista -- all the stuff that's been developed in that area," Yaroslavsky said. "Traffic congestion grows exponentially as you get farther west."

Richard Thorpe, chief executive of the Exposition Construction Authority, said he was confident that the line would become the east-to-west backbone of the transit system from downtown to the Westside.

"We all know there is a need to relieve the I-10 right now. It's nothing more than a parking lot. Light rail is the quickest way of doing it," Thorpe said. "It's going to be a lot cheaper and a lot quicker to get to Santa Monica."

He said the success of the rail project will depend on two factors: "The travel time has got to be competitive with the automobile and efficient bus transfers," such as along major north-south streets like Vermont, Western, Crenshaw, La Brea Avenue and La Cienega Boulevard.

Los Angeles County Supervisor Yvonne B. Burke envisions the Expo Line as a connection corridor for "people who want to come from all different areas" to play at the beach or get to jobs in Santa Monica.

Funding to bring the Expo Line to Santa Monica remains in doubt. The state budget passed by the Assembly cut \$1.3 billion from mass transit projects. The California Transportation Commission has temporarily held up \$314 million that was to be allocated to the Expo Line because the budget failed to pass the state Senate.

Without that money, the Exposition Construction Authority may not have the funds to continue building the line west of Vermont Avenue -- let alone to Santa Monica, Thorpe said.

"We can't award the remaining contracts without that \$314 million," Thorpe said. Without those funds, Thorpe said, officials would begin to see construction delays by the end of this year.

What route the Expo Line would take to Santa Monica remains undecided. In 2000, objections from a homeowners group in the upscale neighborhood of Cheviot Hills derailed use of the old Exposition Boulevard railroad right-of-way. Now a new environmental impact study is underway to determine if that would be the best route.

Though some Westside residents favor it, others insist that the light-rail line should avoid Cheviot Hills and adjacent neighborhoods by staying south of the 10 Freeway. (A longer and more time-consuming route would follow Venice Boulevard west to Sepulveda Boulevard and then turn north before rejoining the Exposition right-of-way from the 405 Freeway to Santa Monica.)

Giuliano and others maintain that the best route to the Westside would be the long-anticipated "Subway to the Sea" that would tunnel beneath Wilshire Boulevard, the densest region of employment and population in the entire region. The Wilshire subway was to have been the backbone of L.A.'s rail network, serving an area that has no nearby freeway and has long suffered from frustrating traffic jams.

But the subway became mired in a political morass after plans to build it farther west ran into a series of political roadblocks.

Rep. Henry A. Waxman (D-Los Angeles) won passage of a congressional ban on tunneling to the west after a March 1985 methane gas explosion in a Ross Dress for Less store on 3rd Street in the Fairfax district.

And the \$300-million-a-mile cost of building the subway became an insurmountable barrier, particularly after Yaroslavsky in November 1998 won voter approval of his measure to bar the use of local transit sales tax receipts for subway construction.

Gridlock on the Westside has reached such frustrating levels that officials have pondered radical solutions such as turning Pico and Olympic boulevards into one-way streets.

Freeways serving the Westside are among the region's most congested; local opposition killed the proposed Beverly Hills freeway, which would have connected Westwood to Echo Park in the 1960s.

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