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Beverly Hills Leaders Endorse 'Subway to the Sea;' Recommend Alignment & Station Locations

Led by former Mayor Allen Alexander, Beverly Hills sprints to the forefront of advocacy for an extension of the Wilshire subway.



Allan Alexander

Years ago many communities made a habit of opposing rail projects, and Beverly Hills was never keen on the prospect of tunneling a subway beneath it. But times have changed. As transit advocates generate excitement about a 'Subway to the Sea,' the city of Beverly Hills has stepped ahead with a comprehensive study on how best to integrate a future subway into its urban fabric. MIR was pleased to speak with Beverly Hills Mass Transit Committee co-chair, and former mayor, Allan Alexander about the study.

The city of Beverly Hills just completed a report studying the prospect of extending the subway through Beverly Hills. What did that report conclude?

The committee was established last year at the recommendation of Mayor Steve Webb and the City Council. I was asked to serve as co-chair along with another former mayor, Mark Egerman. The committee had 18 members, drawn from the business and residential communities. The charge of the committee was quite narrow: to make a recommendation to the City Council as to the route alignment of the subway extension through Beverly Hills and station locations within Beverly Hills.

I am pleased to say that the report by the committee was unanimous, which is quite amazing for Beverly Hills or any community. The conclusion of the committee was to recommend an alignment straight down Wilshire Boulevard from the Western/Wilshire station of the Red Line, then to continue along Santa Monica Boulevard after it splits with Wilshire at the west end of Beverly Hills to a station in Century City.

We recommended two station locations: one at the east end of Beverly Hills "at or near"—that's the language we used—the intersection of La Cienega and Wilshire Boulevards and at the west end of Beverly Hills in the business triangle "at or near" Wilshire and Beverly Drive. If your readers would like to read the actual report it can be found online by going to the city of Beverly Hills website at www.beverlyhills.org, opening up "shortcuts" at the top of the home page, to the topic "Mass Transit Committee," and then scrolling down to "MTC Final Report (January 2007)."

The unanimous decision is an about-face from fifteen years ago. What was the nature of Beverly Hills' past opposition? What has changed?

There is no question that 15 or so years ago there was a significantly different attitude in Beverly Hills about subways. I'm not saying there is now unanimous support for a subway in the city, but I do believe that there has been a very perceivable change of attitude in Beverly Hills. I believe that at this point the community as a whole supports a subway.

I think there are several reasons for the change in attitude. First, folks are fed up with the traffic on the Westside; it's impacting their daily lives in a way that they don't find acceptable. Second, they recognize that there has to be a macro solution to what is clearly a macro traffic problem. I think they realize that we can't continue to put more buses on the streets or increase the number of lanes. To solve the problem, we need grade separation. The best grade separation is underground with heavy rail. They get it.

The third reason is that now we've had many years of experience in L.A. with a subway system. People have experienced it and know it is working in other areas: Downtown, Hollywood, and North Hollywood, and that it works in concert with

the light rail lines and the bus system.

When I ride the subway with people who haven't been on the subway before they are always amazed at how clean, safe, and stylish the system is. Bottom line is they like it, and want to use it again.

A fourth significant factor is Mayor Villaraigosa, who deserves a great deal of credit in this regard. He is a very vocal proponent of subways and, in particular, the so-called "Subway to the Sea." He understands the importance of it, not just to the Westside, but also to the entire greater Los Angeles region, as part of a bigger public transportation infrastructure.

A fifth factor is that Henry Waxman recently changed his position with regard to the methane concerns of extending the subway down Wilshire Boulevard through the so-called "Methane Zone" and seems now to be a true proponent of the Westside subway extension as well. Finally, to some degree, the fact that Beverly Hills is now supportive of the subway, at least all the members of our committee, has caught people by surprise and has refocused their attention on the "Subway to the Sea" as a viable solution to the traffic mess we are in on the Westside.

A subway is not, however, officially on Metro's priority list. Are you optimistic that it will be? Are the benefits significant enough?

I am very optimistic. A lot of people have said, "Well, that's fine now. Beverly Hills is on-board with this issue. But how real is it?" I think it is very real, because I think Beverly Hills and Los Angeles leaders in general now recognize that we need to be able to get people who live on the east side of town to the jobs on the west side via mass transit. Take Beverly Hills, for example. We're a city of only 35,000 residents, but 250,000 people come here each day. These are workers, shoppers, and tourists. The Westside, including Beverly Hills, is short on housing and long on jobs.

Beverly Hills' report has put the route and stations on paper, but many other challenges await, from both Metro and your community. With the report now out, what sort of pushback do you expect?

The question that is already being asked is, "Where will the funding come from?" There is obviously competition for federal funds, not just for other transit projects in the Los Angeles area, but also for transportation projects in other parts of the nation. There is also going to be a lot of political maneuvering over how the state infrastructure bond money is going to be allocated and how much should go to the extension of the subway. And then you have the question of local funding.

The project is estimated to have a \$5 billion price tag, taking it from the Wilshire/Western Station to the City of Santa Monica. In addition to the funding issue, I would anticipate some objections to the subway expansion for fear it will bring crime to the Westside. The studies all show—and our report addresses this issue—crime does not travel on a subway; people travel on a subway.

What station locations and alignments did the report analyze and ultimately recommend?

Our committee, along with our outside consultants, Kaku and Associates, analyzed four different route alignments, three of which came from the Wilshire/Western Station; the fourth came from the Hollywood and Highland station in Hollywood. The alignment that we selected—the so-called "Wilshire alignment"—runs straight down Wilshire. This alignment was the only one that allowed us to site stations at the best locations in Beverly Hills.

Keep in mind that before 1986, when the federal restriction on funding for the subway through the methane zone was enacted, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority had already looked at the alignment issue and had concluded that Wilshire was the preferred route. We're going back to what was the preferred route before, and we still believe that it is.

If you take generally accepted transit parameters and apply them here, our committee found it rather simple and straightforward to determine where the stations should be located. We operated with the assumption that the station located immediately to our east would be at Fairfax and Wilshire. That is based upon Metro's staff reports.

On the west end of Beverly Hills, we assumed that the next station to our west would be Century City, which will no doubt be the most significant subway station on the Westside.

The other well accepted parameter that we used is to locate stations approximately one mile apart. The location at La Cienega and Wilshire, where we recommended a station, is exactly one mile from the Fairfax station. So, it's the perfect

distance. Beverly Drive and Wilshire, where we recommended the west end station, is 1.1 miles from Century City, so it's the ideal location as well. With these two locations in Beverly Hills the distance between them would be ideal as well at 1.2 miles.

The other parameter we considered in locating stations was the quarter-mile radius around each studied station to determine if there are major bus stops and key commercial developments within the quarter-mile radius of the stations in order to secure high ridership for the subway.

Within the quarter-mile radius of the Beverly Drive and Wilshire station would be the Golden Triangle (including Rodeo Drive), the department stores, and South Beverly Drive, which is a hot new commercial area. At the east end of Beverly Hills, the La Cienega and Wilshire station would pick up ridership from the major bus line on La Cienega as well as the commercial area within the quarter-mile radius.

What benefits do you draw from keeping the stations in heavily commercial areas?

One of the advantages of selecting these stations, both of which are in the center of the commercial districts in Beverly Hills, is that it takes away a lot of people's fear. When we were talking about it fifteen or so years ago, I think people thought the subway literally was going to run under their house with a station next door to them. So once we have these station locations, which are not close to residential areas, people say, "Well, I'm OK with that. It's not near my house."

How does might the Beverly Hills study affect the overall movement to generate support for the 'subway to the sea'?

I think that Beverly Hills having completed this analysis will help Metro, because they will be selecting a preferred route and station locations, and now they have the Beverly Hills Mass Transit Committee's input and reasoning. Also, I think we've garnered enough attention that the other areas on the Westside where stations would likely be located, such as Century City, Westwood, the city of Santa Monica to the west of us, and Fairfax, La Brea, and Crenshaw to the east of us, will look at the issue of where they should locate their stations. I think there is a good story here. I think the Beverly Hills study is a good catalyst and methodology for others to follow. I am hopeful that it will happen soon.
