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Subway Update: Can You Dig It?

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Plans for a subway through Beverly Hills move forward.

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The Beverly Hills

Mass Transit

Committee is inching its way toward a recommendation to the City Council regarding a subway in Beverly Hills.

Though a final recommendation is not slated until January 9th, the committee announced on Thursday at a Town Hall meeting that it has decided on a specific route alignment for the proposed subway and determined two ideal station locations.

The “subway to the sea,” if it does get built, will be an extension of the existing Metro Red Line subway which currently runs along Wilshire Boulevard between Union Station in downtown Los Angeles and Western Avenue. The red line also branches northeast from Vermont Avenue to North Hollywood.

“The reality is that there’s a very extensive rapid transit rail system that already exists in Los Angeles and what we’re talking about is a way to extend it in a way that will serve the city of Beverly Hills,” transit and planning consultant Dick Kaku said. Kaku is a transit expert and has been hired by the city to advise the transit committee on technical issues.

One of two potential alignments considered by Kaku and the mass transit committee was along Santa Monica Boulevard. The other was along Wilshire Blvd.

The Santa Monica Boulevard alignment would have started at the Red Line station at Hollywood and Highland and continued on to Century City. The other alignment, along Wilshire Boulevard, was considered more ideal because it is denser in population and employment.

“What we discovered was Santa Monica Boulevard, as busy as it is, through that portion of Santa Monica from West Hollywood through the city of Beverly Hills to Century City, until it gets to Century City, doesn’t have the density of development that we’re looking for,” Kaku said.

The committee also considered extending the existing red line from Western only to San Vicente Boulevard and then going around the Beverly Hills triangle via San Vicente and Santa Monica Boulevards. Another route would have taken San Vicente only as far north as Beverly Boulevard, and cut west along Beverly Boulevard to Santa Monica Boulevard. These alignments however, all fell short of the criteria used by Kaku and the committee for choosing an ideal route.

Besides employment and population density, Kaku looked into the availability of stations along each potential route that could be approximately one mile apart, and within walking distance to as many riders as possible. Also considered was the existing transit activity on the proposed routes. Based on these criteria it was determined that an alignment along Wilshire Boulevard, with stops at La Cienega and Beverly Drive would be ideal.

“The entire Wilshire Boulevard alignment all the way from Wilshire and Western, all the way through Beverly Hills does contain relatively high density development, relatively high public transit usage, [and] lots of public transit service,” Kaku said.

Dan Walsh, CEO of the Beverly Hills Chamber of Commerce, said the Chamber is very attracted to the notion of a subway station at Beverly Drive.

“The Wilshire and Beverly station would deliver visitors as well as employees and workers to essentially the heart of the city,” Walsh said. “It’s very close to the shopping center that is currently world-renowned in the triangle, the emerging growth of a fabulous restaurant street of Canon, and then South Beverly, which is emerging as our newest gem in terms of its shopping appeal, so it’s just ideal.”

Some community members, however, are not convinced that a subway anywhere in Beverly Hills is a good idea.

At Thursday's meeting some raised the issue of crime and terrorism as they relate to the existence of a subway. Committee co-chair Allan Alexander though, said that recent security studies provided by the MTA suggest that subway stations are not a crime threat and that an overwhelming majority of committee members do not consider crime to be an issue.

"The interesting comparison is that there are approximately 128 bus stops in the city of Beverly Hills with approximately 6,000 buses stopping in Beverly Hills every day and there is no significant crime associated with that mass transit system and when it comes to bus stops, it is not a contained system like what you have with subways," Alexander said.

A subway along Wilshire Boulevard would run along the northern border of a significant residential neighborhood, represented by the Beverly Hills Southwest Homeowners Association. President Ken Goldman said the group has not reached an official position on the subway, but he expects that safety and security to be concerns among members.

"Right now the crime rate in Los Angeles on the Metro is very very low because security and security staff are very well funded," Goldman, who is also on the mass transit committee, said. "One concern is what if the funding is greatly reduced in the future?"

Goldman also addressed the concern that construction of the subway stations could suspend business activity in nearby areas.

"[The MTA] tells us that the intersections at those two locations [at Beverly/Rodeo Drive and La Cienega] would not be closed during the week and would be under construction for 8 to 10 weekends, so that should minimize the inconvenience and loss of business," Goldman said.

Other concerns include the feasibility of tunneling underground through Beverly Hills and especially the mid-Wilshire region to the east. In 1985 there was an explosion in the basement of a Ross Dress For Less store due to underground pockets of methane gas. Representative Henry Waxman (D-Los Angeles), whose district includes Beverly

Hills, orchestrated a federal ban on future tunneling in the Fairfax area.

The tunneling ban may soon be lifted though. After the release of a 2005 study by the American Publican Transportation Authority, which found that the risk in tunneling along Wilshire “would be no greater than other subway systems in the US,” Waxman introduced legislation to repeal the ban. The bill was passed by the House but waits to be heard by the Senate.

With the ban removal at least under way and with strong support for the Westside subway extension from Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who also chairs the Los Angeles County MTA Board of Directors, a subway in Beverly Hills looks likely. It’s just not clear when.

“We’re talking anywhere from 10 to 20 years before it would be in place,” Alexander said. “It’s so hard to predict.”

But even if shovels don’t break ground for twenty years, it is essential that the City of Beverly Hills starts planning now, Mayor Steve Webb said.

“In order for us to effectively lobby the federal, the state and the local government, the city needs to take a formal position on this matter,” Webb said. “Because this is something that’s happening today in other communities we need to be out in front.”

Once the mass transit committee, which was appointed by Webb in April of 2006, makes its final recommendation, the city will start to lobby for route alignments and ideal station locations. Other communities are likely to lobby for different alignments.

“I fervently believe that we need a subway system that goes from downtown to the Westside,” Webb said. “Where the alignment is and where the stations are is not my primary concern; my primary concern is for the city to take an official position so we can get out there and make sure that when money is allocated, money is allocated for the Westside.”

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