

Seeking the Light in the Expo Rail Line

Moving LA

By *Kenneth S. Alpern*



Despite the hype, hopes and hoopla about what will happen with the Obama stimulus package and the recently-approved Proposition R, the many projects to come out of these endeavors will not include projects that are unapproved and unexplored by local transportation officials. The newly-promoted and so-called "Expo Line South LA Grade Separation Project" is one such endeavor we should not expect any time soon--if ever.

Only “shovel-ready” (ready-to-go, vetted and needing only funding) projects can occur with the stimulus package—but the only thing “shovel-ready” about this non-existent project is the Bandini being shoveled to South L.A. residents who have been fed a tragic distortion of the truth and who deserve a lot better. I need to emphasize that I personally favor (and have fought for) grade separation and other ways to avoid train/automobile traffic problems whenever possible. On numerous occasions, I have and will come into opposition with other supporters of the Expo Line and mass transit initiatives because I favor the expenditures of safety/operational improvements that others deem unnecessary or cost-ineffective.

However, the claim that only the white/wealthy portions of the county will have their portions of the Expo Line grade-separated is a canard that needs to be quashed. Whether it's Pasadena, South L.A., Culver City or Santa Monica, we're going to see regions that are or are not grade-separated based only on traffic studies, and the same LADOT that insisted on elevating the Expo Line at La Brea and La Cienega signed off on at-grade (street level) crossings in other regions of South L.A.

Furthermore, the irrational, divisive and distorting practice of comparing each mile of the Expo Line for grade separation, to say nothing of trying to divide the different geographic and ethnic communities that the line traverses, not only flies in the face of this rail line's ability to bring these communities together but also ignores the cold, hard facts, numbers and logic that has a singular Metro policy applied to all past and future grade crossings. This policy was put in place after the Pasadena Gold Line experience, and we'll see it utilized for years to come.

The future Downtown Light Rail Connector that will connect the Expo, Blue, Eastside Gold and Pasadena Gold Lines is likely to be underground, and that's not exactly a tony and white portion of the City. It's just so megadense that having it at ground level is an engineering impossibility—especially with so many trains likely to utilize it to get from one part of the county to the other parts. Furthermore, the Eastside Gold Line that will

commence service this year goes underground through some lower- and mixed socioeconomic Latino neighborhoods simply because it's unsafe and imprudent to do otherwise.

It's important to recognize that light rail (unlike, say, a subway) is meant to blend into the community, without a lot of visual and noise impact beyond that already existing with local automobile traffic; elevated or underground portions are a necessary expenditure when safety and operations indicate such alterations. The Mid-City portion of the Expo Line from Crenshaw to Downtown will largely be a street-running portion of the line similar to what we have on the Blue Line, where cars and light rail trains share the streets.

That portion of the line doesn't need all the gates and whistles at traffic lights any more than we need them at normal traffic intersections, since the trains will share the traffic with other cars when the light turns green...so any knucklehead who has a problem knowing they should stop when the light turns red, please turn in your driver's license immediately! We don't grade-separate traffic lights for north-south and east-west automobile flow, and we don't need that practice to change just because a 2-car or 3-car train will be part of the mix (just pretend it's a very long bus, and you'll get the idea... relax, it's gonna be OK!)

Should it be impossible to maintain normal light signal sequences, or accommodate long traffic backups, or prevent safety problems, then elevation or underground diversions have and will be utilized for light rail trains such as the Expo Line.

While I don't deny that there will have to be some accommodations by automobile commuters for a light rail line that—I predict—will enjoy ridership of 70,000-90,000 riders a day like we see on the Blue Line, the LADOT and Metro has and will fight to improve safety and operations and traffic flow when problems exist (*such as on north-south West L.A. surface streets that, like the adjacent 405 freeway, has some of the worst traffic in the nation...literally!*).

Finally, it needs to be pointed out that safety and speed and operations on the Blue and Pasadena Gold Lines have allowed those to be two of the safest, fastest and busiest light rail lines in the nation. Virtually all of the car vs. train accidents have and will continue to be sustained proof that Darwin was right in selecting out the unfit morons who forget they'll have a big "ouchie" to their cars, themselves and their passengers if they try to blow by or around a gate and take on a train.

Similarly, there's not a lot of sympathy that should be dredged up for those who blow through a red light or who drive drunk. I think there's a lot of us who will have our collective learning curve go up a few notches over the next 2-3 years when light rail reaches the Eastside, the Mid-City and the Westside...but we shouldn't be afraid of taking on new challenges when we seek for understanding, not hysteria, as to what the benefits and challenges of light rail are to the citizens of Los Angeles.

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