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THE NEWS

Ontario Airport Gold Line Stop Would Connect to Los Angeles

*Funding questions could get in way of
economic benefits for city, Inland Empire*

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CREJ Staff Writer

A connection linking Ontario with downtown Los Angeles has inland cities excited by the prospects. However, a Metro Gold Line stop at L.A./Ontario International Airport hinges on funding and the completion of the light rail's San Gabriel Valley extension.



"I think [the Ontario Airport stop] completes the entire line," said Habib Balian, chief executive officer of the Metro Gold Line Foothill Extension Construction Authority. "Now the line makes sense. You can go from Union Station in downtown [Los Angeles] to

Pasadena and all the other stops inbetween, and you can also get to the only airport in the region that's going to be expanding in our children's lifetime. It completes the whole picture of the entire San Gabriel Valley going all the way to the east."

Last year, transportation officials conducted a study looking at route options that the Gold Line could take from its current end point in Montclair to the airport. The result of that 10-month effort identified two preferred routes.

One route utilizes existing Metrolink right-of-way to run from the Montclair TransCenter east until it hits the Cucamonga Channel and then heads to the airport. The cost would be \$308.7 million.

The second preferred route identified in the study utilizes a right-of-way different from Metrolink and travels farther into Rancho

Cucamonga before terminating at the airport. The cost of this longer route would be \$399.8 million.

The Southern California Association of Governments and the San Bernardino Associated Governments funded the initial feasibility study. Transportation officials now are trying to patch together the money for a second round of analysis that would include more intense engineering and environmental work.

"Right now, we're working with SCAG, SANBAG, L.A. World Airports and the city of Ontario, just at the staff level, to try to cobble together \$1.2 million dollars," Balian said. "It's a two-year program, and we would hope to have initiated that study by the end of the year."

Before anything arrives in Ontario, the Gold Line's San Gabriel



The first stop of Metro's Gold Line Eastside Expansion is being completed in Los Angeles' Little Tokyo/Arts District. Another proposed extension will continue the Gold Line from its current end in East Pasadena to Montclair. A final leg connecting the route to L.A./Ontario International Airport depends on funding and completion of the light rail's San Gabriel Valley extension.

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Valley's stops, referred to as the Foothill extension, will have to be completed. And that 24-mile-long segment of the Gold Line is also waiting for funding.

The line running from Pasadena to Azusa is shovel-ready, according to Balian. The second section of the Foothill Extension connecting Azusa to Montclair, however, is not.

"That [second] one is less ready, and we didn't want to clear it premature to funding expectations," Balian said.

According to Balian, the Construction Authority's current schedule shows a December 2013 opening for the Pasadena-Azusa portion followed by a 2017 opening for Azusa-Montclair.

Much of the funding discussion hinges on the Long Range Transportation Plan, which the Metro Board of Directors deferred adopting until July 23. The \$271.2 billion plan maps out spending allocations of state and federal money as well as local funds, such as the Measure R half-cent sales tax, for light rail, bus, freeway and other transportation projects.

Metro's long-term funding plan speaks to the various competing interests all in the same line for funding. The waiting, in some cases, has led some to become exasperated at the priority level placed on some projects over others.

Ontario Mayor Paul Leon voiced some frustration with transportation funding challenges while speaking at the Urban Land Institute's San Bernardino Mayor's Forum on June 11.

"There's a lot of plans on the table," Leon said. "Naysayers say let's build a 'subway to the sea.' It'll be 25 years by the time some of these steps off light rail in Montclair under the current conditions."

For Ontario or any other city anticipating a Gold Line stop some time in the future, not only does the stop represent an alternative for commuters but there is also potential for development and growth surrounding those stations.

"We have a strong desire in the city of Ontario to get the Gold Line here as well as other transportation modes because the airport is such a central location, and there's a need to have other modes of transportation next to the airport aside from the automobile," said Tom Danna, Ontario traffic and transportation manager.

Development Possibilities

In March, Ontario City Councilmembers approved a resolution supporting the completion of the Foothill Extension because of the anticipated construction jobs it would create as well as the economic benefits for the entire region.

Not only will Gold Line construction create immediate job opportunities, but Gold Line stops offer gold mines as focal points for transit-oriented development or other high-density development.

area around the airport that we would like to see a multi-modal transit station that would probably have transit-oriented product," said Jerry Blum, planning director at the city of Ontario.

Upon build-out, the city's airport metropolitan area is expected to add some 16,000 residential units in an area that also includes the Citizens Business Bank Arena.

"Everything around the airport is anticipated to have higher development intensity than you generally find in the Inland Empire that's based on a higher level of transit to be built in the area," Blum said.

And Ontario is not the only city that sees a Gold Line stop's potential in attracting development. Many cities began planning or building high-density development near proposed Gold Line stops before the economy turned sour.

The city of Azusa planned for retail and restaurant space in what is called the Downtown North area near the Gold Line stop.

At the site of the future Gold Line stop in Claremont, there is already an established

downtown shopping and business area as well as a Metrolink station. Additionally, Olson Co. built its Village Walk residential project, which includes townhomes and condominiums.

The city of Montclair eventually will have a Gold Line stop at its Montclair Transcenter, which

currently serves as the end point of the Foothill extension. Within the city's North Montclair Downtown Specific Plan, there is a lot of importance placed on the Transcenter becoming a regional hub. Currently, the center offers Metrolink and bus services.

"Once we know construction is in place and once they get to the last point of Azusa [the last stop on the first segment of the Foothill Extension], I think there will be strong interest in building housing to support the [Montclair] Gold Line stop," said Melinda Flores, city of Montclair economic development coordinator. "Having both a link that takes you to Pasadena as well as the Metrolink that takes you to Los Angeles is a positive thing in terms of bringing a strong transportation corridor to the Inland Empire and Montclair."

Prior to the economic downturn, Flores said there was developer interest in building near the station, but those plans have since been placed on hold.

"There's still interest and still shopping around, but right now they're just holding off until they see a turn in the economy," Flores said. "We have the opportunity and land uses in place. It's just a matter of working with the property owners. When there is a need for more housing development, there will be that interest in parcels within the north [part of the city]."

But everything, including plans and growth projections, all tend to circle back to funding and the question of whether the money can and will be pieced together in a relatively timely manner.

"We just hope that there's support for funding, and they get additional funding to pay for construction," Flores said. "Because the Inland Empire has grown so much and

"We just hope that there's support for funding, and they get additional funding to pay for construction. Because the Inland Empire has grown so much and there are a vast amount of commuters, it would be a wise choice of funds."

Melinda Flores — City of Montclair