

Legislators challenge mayor on Westside subway funding

A group of House members urges the MTA to include three other projects in a bid for federal funding.

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Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's efforts to fast-track the long-stalled Westside subway faced a challenge Tuesday when a bipartisan group of congressional representatives said the current plan is unlikely to bring immediate federal funding to L.A. County.

Villaraigosa has been pushing to have the subway completed in 10 years — more than 15 years earlier than under current estimates. At his urging, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority board agreed to submit the subway expansion, as well as a plan to build a light-rail through downtown, as the county's two projects to compete for a share of a national pool of federal funding.

But the mayor's push has inflamed a regional battle brewing for several years on the MTA board over which transit projects to pursue.

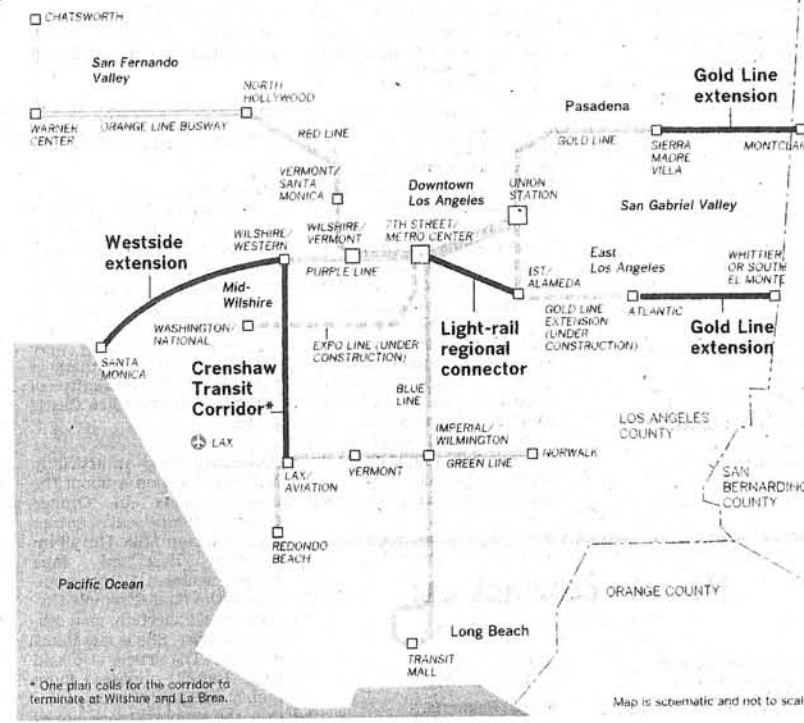
The 14 members of Congress who signed a letter released Tuesday said those two programs don't have a good shot at immediate federal funding.

Further, they said the county risks not getting much from the federal New Starts program for several years unless it adds other regional transit proposals to the application, including the Gold Line extension east from Pasadena, a rail line down Crenshaw Boulevard and the Gold Line Eastside extension Phase 2 from East L.A. to South El Monte or Whittier.

"We are very concerned that Los Angeles County is not posi-

Battle for funding

In September, the MTA board voted to seek federal New Starts funding for the Westside subway extension and a downtown light-rail regional connector. But more than a dozen Congress members sent the board a letter Tuesday saying the Crenshaw Transit Corridor and the Gold Line extensions east from Pasadena and East L.A. should be included in the funding request.



Sources: MTA, Times reporting

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tioning itself well to receive its fair share of New Starts funding in the near- and long-term," the delegation wrote.

The letter was signed by Reps. Adam Schiff (D-Burbank), David Dreier (R-San Dimas), Maxine Waters (D-Los Angeles), Jane Harman (D-Venice) and Diane Watson (D-Los Angeles), among others.

Villaraigosa, county Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky and others are pushing to make the Westside subway a top priority. Officials have been trying to build the line for decades but have faced numerous barriers, including the estimated \$5-billion or more price tag.

Critics, however, have questioned the logic of spending so much money on one project and suggested that transportation money could be better spent on less expensive projects elsewhere in the region.

Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, who represents South L.A. and backs the Crenshaw rail line concept, said the message of the letter is "that no one plan should dominate. No one rail line should dominate."

Schiff said that "if the board does not include these projects, we leave hundreds of millions of federal dollars on the table that will be directed

elsewhere in the country."

The letter came just two days before the MTA board is expected to vote on the Long Range Transportation Plan, a document that outlines the county's transportation priorities and how an estimated \$300 billion should be spent over the next 30 years.

Others on the MTA board said the plan already allocates money for the projects that the House members desire, just not the New Starts funding. They also said the Westside extension and regional connector are two projects that help not only the Westside but also the entire region.

"The MTA board unanimously adopted its federal transit priorities last month, and on the merits the subway and regional connector have the greatest potential to earn federal support," Villaraigosa said in a statement.

In September, the board agreed to submit the Westside subway extension and the downtown connector linking the Red, Purple, Blue and Gold rail lines as the two projects to compete for a share of a national pool of federal funding.

The strategy had been for the board to unanimously approve submission of the Westside subway and downtown

connector to the federal government for New Starts funding. Seeking such funding for the two projects was included in the long-range plan. But the congressional delegation's letter, and actions by other MTA board members signal that there could be a showdown on Thursday before the long-range plan is approved.

Yaroslavsky said he welcomed the delegation's dialogue with the board. But he said he believes that if five projects are put up for New Starts funding, none of them will receive any. And that could mean the death of the Westside subway, which, because its high cost, is dependent on large amounts of federal money.

"The notion of the proposal that there would be five New Starts projects in L.A. County is suicide," Yaroslavsky said. "It's a prescription for none of the projects to get federal funding."

Also on Tuesday, the Bus Riders Union staged a rally outside MTA headquarters calling for the board to reject the long-range plan because the group worries about fare increases and said the document could be "a civil rights and environmental disaster."