

## Bill gives chance to apply brakes on errant MTA

By Wayne Avrashow

A yes vote on Proposition A, sponsored by Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky, will provide long-overdue reform for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority and ensure a viable transportation system for Los Angeles in the 21st century.

Specifically, the proposition would halt the MTA subway project after completion to North Hollywood, reallocate precious transit funds to other transit modes, create a citizen oversight committee and restore fiscal sanity by mandating an annual independent audit.

The subway's current estimated cost is \$300 million per mile. But among the certainties in life — nearly equal to death and taxes — are cost overruns for MTA subways. Federal subsidies to the MTA are declining and the agency's debt is a staggering \$7 billion. The subway is fiscally unsustainable and conceptually illogical for a 21st century Los Angeles when considering our region's geographic sprawl and underground rail's increasing costs.

The existing subway emanating from downtown serves a vital purpose. Proposition A's passage will secure this soon-to-be-completed 18 miles of subway as the transit axis. This downtown-based transit spine can be augmented by light rail at one-fifth the cost of the subway, improved bus service and dedicated busways.

Los Angeles has enjoyed a long romance with rail lines. However, the time for a massive underground rail system has long passed. Continuing suburban growth is graphically demonstrated by the county's imminent approval of a new community planned for 70,000 residents near Valencia. This growth in outlying areas, freeways, societal changes and zoning that dispersed high-rise office buildings, all dictate that a mature Los Angeles is a series of decentralized communities without the residential density or centralized employment centers of major East Coast cities or those in foreign locales.

Accordingly, our transit plan must not only answer the question how to transport commuters from the Eastside to downtown, but also how to transport passengers from Hollywood to the airport and from Pacoima to Warner Center.

This flexible and realistic transit program will better serve our region than a \$300 million per mile subway that will bankrupt all other transit opportunities.

Those whose hearts still pound at the allure of underground rail may be sobered that the fiscal consequence of constructing an additional one mile of subway is equal to acquiring 1,000 buses or constructing five miles of light rail.

In those communities, such as the

Eastside, that were slated to receive a subway, light rail and increased bus service should be given a priority before improvements commence to other areas.

In designing our transit future, we cannot totally rely on the free market's invisible hand. While incentives should be promoted to increase density along light-rail stops, new "transit-oriented development" is only of marginal benefit in mature and developed cities.

Ceasing future subway expansion should not be interpreted as Los Angeles losing faith in itself, but rather a city celebrating and acknowledging its unique dynamics. Adoption of Proposition A will stop transit planners from fixating on the dreamy mirage of shiny new subway cars whisking commuters throughout our basin. Los Angeles' residential and commercial cores are not pulsating in one central location; Los Angeles is here, there and everywhere, with density, urban centers and attractions dispersed throughout the basin, and the cost of a subway system that connects this region is simply not feasible.

Some well-intentioned people in Los Angeles argue to continue the subway, or to merely pause and periodically reassess its need; however, continuing a march toward financial irresponsibility is never a profile in political courage. Supervisor Yaroslavsky deserves praise for attempting to redirect spending from a failed government project and to restore fiscal accountability to an organization in disarray.

The time has come to end the subway's expansion. Proposition A is the next vital step to planning, designing and constructing a 21st century transit plan for Southern California.

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