

Expo



TWO RAIL LINES, ONE MISSION: CONNECTING SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

By Rich Sampson

Over the last two decades, Los Angeles has undertaken a conscious and substantive approach to improving its mobility options through passenger rail projects. From the 388-mile Metrolink commuter rail network to the region's two subway and three light rail routes, an area known for automobile exclusivity has become anything but. Having established a real presence for passenger rail, the region is now preparing even greater rail transit resources: the Gold Line Eastside Extension and the EXPO Line (for more information on Metrolink, see RAIL #4; for more information on the Gold Line light rail, see RAIL #11 – ed).

The two light rail projects – projected to open in late 2009 and mid-2010, respectively – head in opposite directions from downtown Los Angeles and are defined by sets of differing characteristics. However, both speak to the important and growing role that passenger rail service plays in Southern California, and are indicators of a larger priority of connecting communities. They will also

add nearly 15 miles to produce almost 90-mile rail transit network.

The Gold Line Eastside Extension

In 2003, the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) opened the Gold Line light rail route between Union Station in downtown Los Angeles and Pasadena, utilizing a former Santa Fe Railroad right-of-way to connect the central business district to one of the region's most prosperous communities. After more than six years of service, the Gold Line moves more than 24,000 daily riders and offers connections to MTA's larger rail and bus network at Union Station, where it also meets hundreds of daily Metrolink and Amtrak trains.

Meanwhile, in the 1980s and early 90s, when the MTA was planning its initial subway network – which links the Hollywood and Mid-Wilshire districts with downtown on the Red and Purple

Lines – planners had sketched-out an underground route to head east from the subway's current Union Station terminus to reach East Los Angeles. However, as those lines' costs rose substantially during construction, elected officials pushed for a halt to expensive subway projects. After the Gold Line opened almost 20 years later, an effort re-emerged to serve the city's east side by rail, but this time employ the successful Gold Line model.

The new route's distinction as a build-out of the existing Gold Line rather than a new subway line is more than the result of a simple preference for the lower capital cost needed to construct light rail. Instead, the Pasadena-to-downtown line offered the region a refreshed concept for deploying rail transit. Although the MTA had completed its Blue and Green light rail lines prior to the Gold Line, those routes' ability to shape the direction of the neighborhoods and communities was largely limited to the number of riders they carried. In the Gold Line, the agency and community leaders now had a tool to influence land use, revitalize established



and Southern California's legendary Red Car streetcar network linked Eastside neighborhoods such as Boyle Heights, Eagle Rock and Mt. Washington, which flourished throughout the 20th Century. California State University – Los Angeles and Occidental College – where President Barack Obama once studied – helped solidify the area as one of the region's most stable communities.

because we're so transit-dependent," says Diana Tarango, an East Los Angeles resident who participated in MTA's advisory committee for the project. "So many of our people do go out to work in houses in West L.A. In order to get there, why shouldn't they have the luxury of something comfortable, fast and running on schedule?"

MTA planners worked closely with community representatives to determine how a rail line could best serve Eastside. The group returned with priorities to connect the wealth of regional transit connections available downtown at Union Station with Boyle Heights before reaching the heart of East Los Angeles at Atlantic and Pomonca Boulevards. With the corridor's east-southeast orientation established, the MTA engineers went to work on an alignment to make the plan possible. That solution became a route that swung south from Union Station, through the Little Tokyo district before heading over the Los Angeles River on 1st Street. The line will enter a 1.8-mile tunnel underneath 1st Street under Boyle Heights, owing to high traffic density in the area. Trains will re-emerge on the surface just after Lorena Street, before ultimately concluding on a street-running segment on 3rd Street to reach East Los Angeles. In all, the six-mile line will serve eight new stations – two in subway at Mariachi Plaza and Soto – and Gold Line trains will span the entire 20-mile route between Pasadena and East Los Angeles.

"The Eastside Gold Line has been a challenging project from an engineering perspective," explains Patrick Nicholson,

neighborhoods and districts, and more seamlessly connect the region.

MTA planners and engineers utilized a combination of existing rail rights of way, elevated structures, short subway tunnels and highway medians to link downtown and Pasadena. This meant the Gold Line could access the heart of important communities and generate strong ridership for the service without imposing an invasive construction process on the area. More importantly, governmental jurisdictions and zoning boards along the route allowed land parcels near Gold Line stations to host higher- and mixed-use densities to leverage the new rail line. Finally, key elements of the system, from station and railcar design to public art and the Gold Line brand itself were tailor-made to become active and inspiring participants along the corridor. In 2005, RAIL Magazine dubbed this concept The Gold Standard to indicate a higher threshold for the opportunities of passenger rail, and this new standard is the foundation for the Eastside Extension project.

Despite its population base of over 230,000 and dynamic nodes of activity, Eastside missed out on Los Angeles' first wave of rail transit routes, mostly for lack of a central corridor or right-of-way to position tracks. Once multiple rail lines proved themselves important aspects of the Southern California transportation network, Eastside officials and leaders demanded rails reach their community.

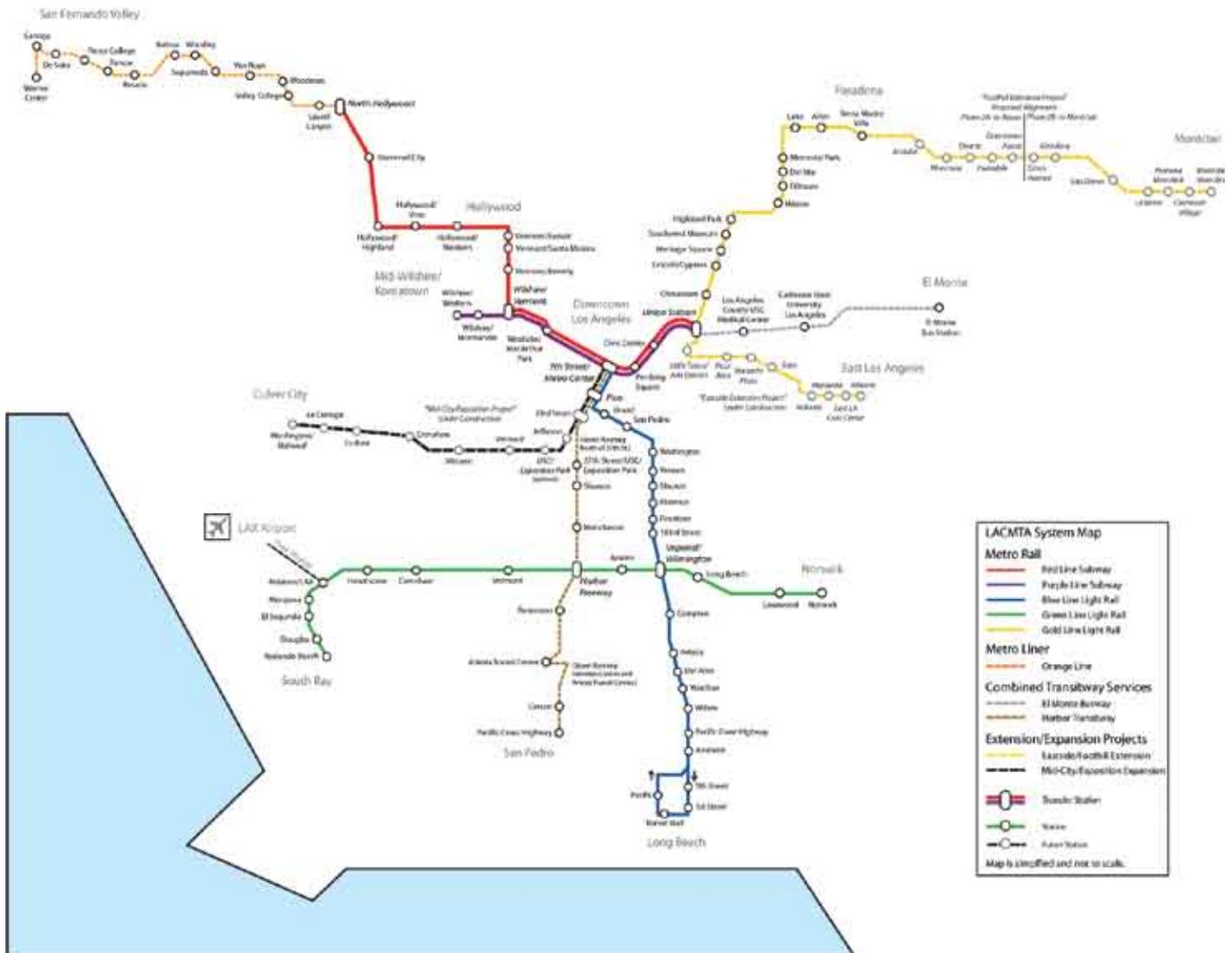
"The Gold Line is a method of transportation that is very much needed in East Los Angeles and Boyle Heights

The first train navigates the new Eastside Gold Line trackage in Little Tokyo on January 27, 2009.

Reaching For the Gold

Perched atop the gently-sloping Monterey Hills east of downtown and the Los Angeles River is the region known locally as Eastside. The Southern Pacific's tracks first scaled the area in 1875





Los Angeles' rapidly-expanding passenger rail network will be bolstered by the additions of the Eastside Gold Line and Exposition Line.

Project Manager for AECOM's former DMJM-Harris group, which has been overseeing the engineering and design work for the project. "We've utilized a combination of in-street, mixed-traffic alignments, underground tunnels and private easements to get to Eastside from downtown. But the right blend of leadership and community involvement made this project possible."

Indeed, for local officials and community leaders, it doesn't matter how much the trains get to their community, just that they arrive at all.

"It's a time to celebrate a great victory. After more than ten years of struggling to bring rail access to the highly transit-dependent communities of Little Tokyo, Boyle Heights and East Los Angeles, we will break ground on this crucial link to the regional transportation system," said Los Angeles County Supervisor Gloria Molina – who represents the area – at the 2004 groundbreaking ceremony.

"This would not have happened without a united community, united local leaders, and a united congressional delegation. We should all be proud to say, 'Next Stop: East L.A.'"

Congresswoman Lucille Roybal-Allard echoed those comments, saying, "for more than a decade, leaders past and present have fought tirelessly to overcome the many obstacles that have threatened our efforts to bring affordable and efficient transportation to the residents of East Los Angeles. The Gold Line is important to our communities because it will help enhance the quality of life for families by increasing their mobility and access to jobs and key services."

Continued Strong Signals for Growth

On January 27, for the first time since the last fabled Red Car streetcar operated on March 31, 1963, a rail transit vehicle operated on First Street as the MTA

began its first test of the Gold Line tracks. Although the event was merely a very slow trip to test the clearances of the overhead electric catenary, it marked an important indicator of the Gold Line's ultimate trajectory towards Eastside. Like its predecessor in Pasadena, the new route is generating tangible economic development interest.

Due to the strong track record of the MTA's existing subway and light rail lines in producing economic vibrancy, a host of residential, retail and commercial developments are underway at and near Eastside stations. A \$66 million, 300-unit residential development – along with mixed-use retail components – is complete near the Little Tokyo station, while 880 new housing units in Boyle Heights dovetail with a \$183 million rehabilitation of the nearby White Memorial Medical Center. Moreover, the MTA itself is managing the development of 3.6 acres of property it owns at the

Soto station. In all, more than half a billion dollars in new development has already occurred due to the project.

“For years, it was very hard to get developers interested in this area. But now, we’re running into more and more developers, buying property and looking at other properties to develop, and much of this interest is centering on the rail line,” said Tony Salazar, principal in the development firm McCormack Baron Salazar LLP, which worked with MTA on the Aliso Village residential project in Boyle Heights. “We’re expecting a great deal of competition for this and other proposed solicitations. People have seen how mixed-use projects have worked along other rail lines in L.A. so they’re all coming over here.”

Percy Vaz, President of Amcal Multi-Housing Inc., agrees, saying, “we’ve seen how development has really taken off at these rail stations and it’s a priority for us now to look at sites along the Eastside rail line.” Amcal is developing residential units along Third Street in East Los Angeles.

Inasmuch as the strong development interest indicates momentum building for the Eastside Gold Line’s expected opening later this summer or fall, so does the desire for expanded Gold Line service in other communities. Heading east from Pasadena, the so-called “Foothill communities” of Arcadia, Azusa, Glendora, Pomonca and Montclair are working with the MTA to extend the route, while an expansion of the Eastside segment could reach the cities of El Monte and Whittier in years ahead.

The Exposition Line

While leaders and planners eventually found a way to link downtown and Eastside through a series of surface, subway and other alignments, a route connecting the heart of Los Angeles to the west was a bit more obvious. In 1990, the MTA purchased a railroad right-of-way from the Southern Pacific that ran from just south of downtown to the Pacific Ocean at Santa Monica. The line originally was constructed by the Los Angeles & Independence Railroad to bring Nevada silver to the Port of Los Angeles, then located in Santa Monica. Over the next half-century, the route evolved as a high-frequency commuter rail line, dubbed the Santa Monica Air Line by the Pacific Electric interurban company. The name was apt, as it was rumored David Douglas developed many of his airliner designs while commuting over the route.

As industrial and commuting patterns changed in the region in the second half of the 20th Century, the line transitioned into predominately freight service, which was then abandoned by 1989. Just a year away from opening its Red Line subway and Blue Line light rail, the MTA eagerly moved to protect a vital corridor.

Planning for Expo

After the debut of the Blue and Red Lines in 1990, MTA’s rail transit network was further enlivened with the east-west Green Line in 1995 and the more recent Gold Line in 2003. During that time, MTA began community outreach to determine how best to utilize its swath of railroad land that cut through the middle of the urbanized core. The need

for more advanced transit options in the region was apparent, as the Santa Monica Freeway – Interstate 10 – was long-since congested during most hours and the local street grid of Exposition, Adams, Jefferson and Martin Luther King Jr. boulevards were inundated with neighborhood traffic. Additionally, the wide medians and alignments established by the railroad – around which the current Exposition Blvd. was constructed – presented a corridor that could easily be adapted to high-frequency transit service.

“The railroad alignment was a natural transit corridor: a high-density region with a physically-established right-of-way,” explains Rachel Vandenberg, also with AECOM/DMJM+Harris, which orchestrated the engineering work, similar to its efforts with the Eastside Gold Line. “The issue then became updating this stretch of railroad, which hadn’t seen passenger traffic for almost 50 years, and only light freight trains more recently.”

The MTA, working with Vandenberg and her colleagues, began hosting a series of community meetings to identify how to reinstitute transit service along the corridor. The process considered different transit modes – heavy rail, light rail and bus rapid transit – along with station locations, economic development and zoning, and integration with the existing transportation network. Through nearly 100 community events, the MTA decided it would build a light rail line on the route, which would be completed in two phases: the first would connect with the existing Blue Line near downtown and continue to Culver City via the railroad right of way; the second would extend west from Culver City to Santa Monica with a final alignment to be determined

The Exposition Line project will rehabilitate the former Santa Monica Air Line (left), including new pedestrian and bicycle paths alongside the route.



Photo courtesy of Friends of Expo



Image courtesy of Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority



The right-of-way of the Santa Monica Air Line offered a prime opportunity for expanded rail transit service to the region's west side.

later.

In 2003, the California State Legislature authorized the creation of the Exposition Construction Authority to oversee construction and execution of the project, similar to the method used to build the Pasadena Gold Line. The seven-member body would be constituted of two members each from the City and County of Los Angeles, one seat for the cities of both Culver City and Santa Monica, and the seventh from the MTA. The single-purpose agency approach allowed the MTA to focus its attention on operating its transit network, while the Construction Authority offered an expedited decision-making process.

With a single-purpose agency, it is easier to get action in a timely fashion when it's necessary for the board to approve something," says the MTA's Joel Sandberg, the initial CEO of the Exposition Construction Authority. "Of course, having a single purpose agency makes it much easier to keep the board informed. The Gold Line authority had five members; this board on the Expo project will have seven. In contrast, the Metro board has 13 members. It is much easier to keep the board members informed and to provide good coordination with the project activities with a smaller board."

Restoring the Air Line Tradition

Having a well-established rail

corridor in-hand, the Construction Authority went to work establishing the service's identity. Although the former Air Line commuter trains served Los Angeles' Union Station directly, the new system would link directly with the Blue Line route to the underground Metro Center station downtown. To reach the Blue Line tracks, Exposition Line trains would deviate from the abandoned railbed at Figueroa Street via a 2,500-foot underground trench to arrive on Flower Street, on which it would ultimately connect with the existing Blue Line rails north of Washington Boulevard. All told, the Exposition Line would travel south and west over more than eight miles of new track from the existing Metro Center and Pico Blue Line stations and serve nine new stations.

The Exposition Line travels through some of the nation's most densely-populated neighborhoods, and its population is growing. More than 800,000 people live within 2 miles of the route, making it the twelfth-most populated urban area in the nation. By 2020, population density within a half-mile of the line will average more than 16,600, and 29 percent of those residents do not own a car. As a result, the new line is projected to carry nearly 30,000 daily riders by 2020 – if not sooner. Exposition Line trains will make the trip in under 30 minutes.

"With such a strong ridership

base, this service must be planned and designed to match a certain expectation of quality," says AECOM's Vandenberg. "Everything from platform width to vehicle design to the trackbed must be built to support a high-frequency, high-reliability light rail operation."

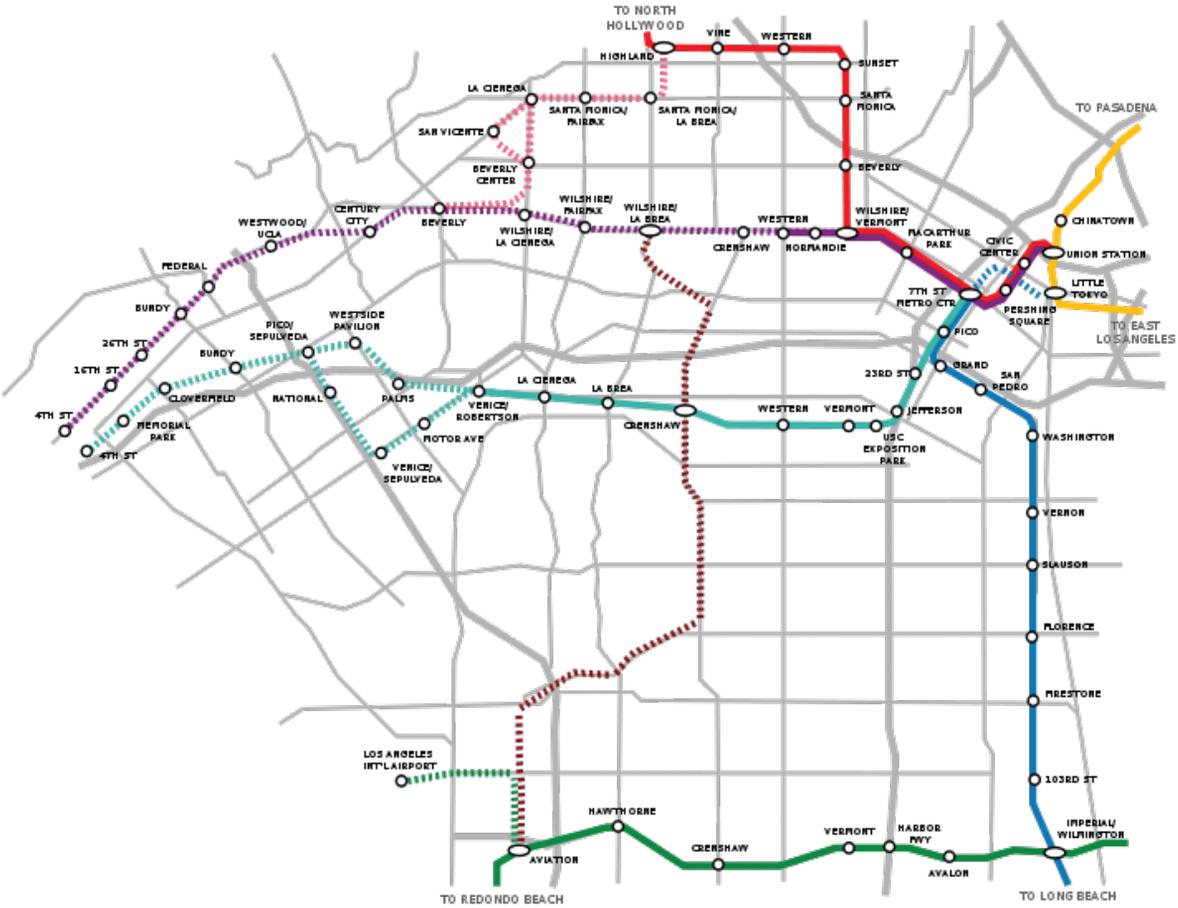
The Construction Authority and the MTA are matching the Exposition Line's strong ridership projections with a design approach that harks back to the high-quality service the area once enjoyed with the Air Line trains. The route is under construction as a transit parkway – combining the light rail service with bikeway facilities, pedestrian linkages, landscape design, station architecture, public art and related system facilities. To do so, the Construction Authority established a 14-member Urban Design Committee, made-up of local residents, business representatives and civic and faith-based leaders to coordinate a cohesive identity for the project's aesthetic elements.

The Design Committee's self-described mission will "weave a Transit Parkway through an existing urban fabric allowing communities to come together, integrate neighborhoods and allow for the transit system to become a source of civic pride."

To the Sea

As construction continues to ready the 8.6-mile line for service in the summer of 2010, planning continues to realize the vision to expand the Exposition Line from Culver City to a terminus at the Santa Monica Pier along the shores of the Pacific. Although the existing railroad right-of-way does continue west from the current Culver City endpoint at Venice Boulevard, it has been encroached upon by parking lots and small building structures as it nears Santa Monica.

The Construction Authority is overseeing the environmental planning process for phase two, where two routing options are under review: a continuation of the existing railroad route before continuing on either on-street trackage or subway tunnel via Exposition Boulevard, Olympic



Mao courtesy of Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority

The MTA is considering additional rail service in the region (above), including the completion of the Exposition Line to Santa Monica. Two different route options (dotted teal lines) are being evaluated.

Boulevard and/or Colorado Avenue to reach downtown Santa Monica; or an approach deviating from the right-of-way onto Washington Boulevard in Culver City, before turning north on Sepulveda Boulevard – serving the Palms and Mar Vista communities – en route to Santa Monica.

“The right-of-way west of Culver City was not maintained with the same integrity as the stretch to its east,” explains Vandenberg. “However, regardless of the routing option selected, the phase two expansion offers many benefits to the region in terms of ridership and connectivity.”

Indeed, either option will add at least seven additional miles and seven new stations to the route, while drawing upwards of 60,000 daily riders by 2030. Trains would complete the run between Santa Monica and Metro Center in 50 minutes at most. The full extension of the Exposition Line would not only mark the restoration of the

fabled Santa Monica Air Line, but also represent a larger fulfillment of a truly comprehensive rail transit network in Southern California.

“This crucial link to the regional transportation system marks a major milestone in bringing rail access to the Westside,” said County Supervisor Molina. “It’s been over 50 years since Pacific Electric’s Santa Monica Air Line provided passenger service along this right-of-way and we will once again have a rail system in place to ease congestion and speed travel times for Westside residents.”

The Big Picture

In their own right, both the Eastside Gold Line and Exposition Line stand as distinct projects designed to responsively meet the needs of their specific communities and neighborhoods. However, in concert with the gradual, but cohesive build-

out of Southern California’s passenger rail network, a larger vision for transportation priorities is readily apparent. From the warm sands of the Pacific coast in Santa Monica to the well-established districts and neighborhoods on the Eastside, the region and its leaders recognize they are truly connected in their need for mobility, and how it can shape their communities.

“We understand that if we don’t begin to rethink what the region looks like, if we don’t begin to advance the public transit and pull people out of their single-passenger automobiles, if we don’t figure out how to have density along transportation corridors like they do in every great city around the world, we’re not going to be able to address the quality of life in this city,” says Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa. 