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Editorial

Keeping transit on track in L.A. County

Parochialism by members of the area's congressional delegation could derail the Wilshire Boulevard subway.

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Measure R, last year's [ballot initiative](#) raising L.A. County's sales tax to fund transit improvements, was nearly defeated by politicians squabbling over more money for their districts. Voters, fortunately, were wiser than their representatives, and the measure prevailed -- but the parade of parochialism isn't over. Rather than working as a team to secure federal funding, members of Congress from across the county are promoting hometown projects in a way that could end up derailing the far more worthy Wilshire Boulevard subway.

Fourteen members of Congress [signed a letter](#) Tuesday to the board of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, which meets today to vote on a plan laying out spending priorities for the coming decades. The letter's aim was to persuade the board to seek federal New Starts transit funds for three projects on the drawing board: the Gold Line's Foothill extension from Pasadena toward Claremont, another branch of the Gold Line from East L.A. toward Whittier, and a new light-rail line down Crenshaw Boulevard. Last month, the board unanimously opted not to pursue federal money for any of those projects, instead naming the Wilshire subway and a related project that better connects rail lines passing through downtown L.A. as its priorities.

The MTA board's decision was logical. The downtown and Wilshire projects are in the densest part of the county, and their potential ridership dwarfs that of the other three. That makes them L.A.'s strongest entries in the fierce national competition for funding.

The letter's signatories argue that the money game is all about timing. The subway won't be ready to collect federal money for at least five years, while the other projects, most notably the Foothill extension, could be ready much earlier. Why not try to drum up some cash for the Gold and Crenshaw lines now, and go for subway money later? The answer is that the federal government seldom funds more than one project in a city at a time; if the Gold Line were already being funded in, say, 2015, there would be little chance the subway would be funded. Moreover, the other three projects don't actually need federal funds -- all of them can be built with local money (albeit not as quickly, and perhaps not extending as far). The subway, though, cannot; without federal matching funds, there isn't enough sales-tax money to extend it. In other words, if the letter's signatories get their way, it will probably kill the subway and the downtown connector.

Local members of Congress would rather bring home the bacon for their constituents than do what's best for the region -- which helps explain why L.A. has the nation's worst traffic.

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