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Westside subway project is reaffirmed MTA also lists a downtown Los Angeles rail connector as a top funding priority.

By Ari B. Bloomekatz

L.A. County officials approved a long-range transportation plan Thursday, reaffirming the Westside subway and a rail connection through downtown L.A. as top priorities for federal funding.

The vote by the Metropolitan Transportation Authority board marks a victory for backers of the Westside subway, who are hoping to fast-track the project so that it is finished in as few as 10 years.

But the plan also affirmed several other major rail and road projects, notably proposed lines in the San Gabriel Valley and South L.A.

The document outlines how the agency will spend an estimated \$300 billion over the next 30 years.

The plan calls for a significant increase in rail lines around the county and the widening of freeways. Many of the projects still require significant funding, much of which would have to come from the federal government or partners in the private sector. But the projects have a fighting chance because voters approved a sales-tax increase last year to support transportation.

"It's a historic vote at a historic time for transportation planning in Los Angeles County," said Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky.

The board took the action in support of the Westside subway despite calls this week from 14 members of Southern California's congressional delegation and eight state legislators asking that the MTA add other projects to its list for New Starts federal money. They questioned whether the subway would get immediate federal funding.

Under the board action, the subway and the regional connector -- a proposed rail line through downtown L.A. -- would be the only two projects for which New Starts funding is sought.

But an amendment to the plan said the agency would "pursue other potential funding sources" for the proposed Crenshaw line and the Gold Line Foothill Extension east from Pasadena. Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, who represents the Crenshaw area, and San Gabriel Valley officials had pushed for the amendment.

The Crenshaw line's budget is \$1.7 billion, but Ridley-Thomas wants a total of roughly \$2.1 billion so that parts of it can be built as a subway.

The extension of the Gold Line east from Pasadena would be built by the Gold Line Foothill Extension Authority. And MTA agreed to operate the segment to Azusa.

Habib Balian, chief executive of the Gold Line authority, said he hopes to break ground on that segment of the extension by summer 2010 and have it completed by 2013.

"I think it's a chance for us to really remake our region," said John Fasana, a Duarte City Council member and MTA board member.

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