

# Los Angeles Times

## Los Angeles County is poised to accelerate its rail projects

With financial support from Measure R, a voter-approved sales tax, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority's proposed \$4.15-billion budget could pay for planning or construction for roughly a dozen lines.

By Ari Bloomekatz, Times Staff Writer  
May 15, 2011

While many agencies are cutting back, Los Angeles' aggressive rail expansion is picking up steam. The county's [Metropolitan Transportation Authority](#) unveiled this month a record \$4.15-billion budget that includes money for about a dozen rail lines that are either under construction or being planned.

If all goes as anticipated, Metro in the next year would begin construction of a new rail line along Crenshaw Boulevard, complete the Expo Line to Culver City and continue work on an expansion of the Gold Line from Pasadena to Azusa.

It would be the first time L.A. would have three rail projects under construction at the same time.

The rail expansion has been mostly shielded from cutbacks related to the bad economy because a large portion of the funding comes from Measure R, the .5-cent sales tax voters approved in 2008.

The budget proposes more than \$1 billion for Measure R projects that also include scores of highway efforts, including \$11.5 million for planning of the High Desert Corridor that would connect the Antelope and Apple valleys and funds for an extension of the Valley busway, known as the Orange Line, from Canoga Park to Chatsworth.

But the big-ticket item is rail.

And officials hope Measure R will bring this form of mass transit to corners of the county that until now have not had rail as an option. The biggest example is the densely populated, traffic-choked Westside. Phase One of the Expo Line goes to Culver City, and Phase Two is to go to Santa Monica.

The Crenshaw Line would take rail into parts of South L.A. and Inglewood, while the Gold Line extension would push L.A.'s rail network east from Pasadena to Azusa. Proposed extensions would take it to Montclair and then to Ontario International Airport.

"We were very fortunate to get a mandate from the voters in the depth of the depression," said David Yale, Metro's deputy executive officer. "So we are busy, especially on the planning and construction side."

Metro's rail expansion is also buttressed by state and federal funds as well as a \$750-million bond that was issued in 2010 and sold to investors that include Barclays Capital and [Goldman Sachs](#).

Dozens of agencies around the country have chosen to raise money for transit projects at the ballot box, including those in Denver, Seattle and Austin, Texas.

But transit watchers across the country say this region has become the prime example of how to raise money for rail and is an innovator in pursuing loans to speed up construction.

Earlier this year, Mayor [Antonio Villaraigosa](#) introduced his America Fast Forward plan to leverage loans from the Transportation Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act and to create federally backed transit bonds for private investors.

If it is achieved, Villaraigosa said, Metro would be able to build many of the Measure R projects in 10 years instead of 30.

"You have this archetype of L.A. as the highway city of America. Really, in fact, the voters are saying we're looking to

invest in a mode outside of driving. There's really serious rail investment, and that really gets after that archetype," said Adie Tomer, a transportation expert with the Brookings Institution.

"All of a sudden you have this really big powerful place that's not just changing mind-sets about who they are but has the potential to dramatically remake the way you get around it," Tomer said. "It's a huge opportunity.... It is going to definitely be felt and watched across the country."

But there are significant barriers to the proposed budget and to officials' plans of speeding up projects.

It is still unclear whether funds from Proposition 1B, a transportation bond measure passed by voters in 2006, will be available this fall.

That could affect several projects, including the second phase of the Expo Line.

The federal government may also not reauthorize the surface transportation bill, which would make it increasingly difficult to build projects faster.

The budget is 6.3% larger than this year's and does not include any wage increase for Metro employees, though the agency is still negotiating with labor unions.

Metro's budget is balanced partly because of a slew of bus service cuts planned for June and other reductions to bus operating and capital expenses.

The cuts would eliminate several lines and would result in a 5.2% reduction in the number of hours Metro provides service.

Officials say that they would cut only lines with low ridership and that passengers on those lines would have other easily accessible options. But some groups, including the Bus Riders Union, say those cuts are unnecessary and would make it more difficult for riders, particularly in low-income communities, to get around.

"While the size of the budget has increased, bus service has continued to decline," said Sunyoung Yang of the Bus Riders Union. "The agency acknowledges more is being spent on capital at the same time that the agency works to make the bus system more efficient. But reading the fine print, we know that there are choices being made to spend less ... each year on bus operations."

Some of the savings from cutting bus lines can be attributed to fuel costs. This year Metro expects to spend about \$82 million on fuel and propulsion power, and it projects spending \$7 million less next year. Officials say they would save \$2.2 million in costs from the service reductions but also face a \$900,000 increase in electricity expenses because of the Expo Line.

Brian Taylor of UCLA's Institute of Transportation Studies said that with its aggressive plans for new projects, Metro should begin thinking about how to raise money for operating the lines once they are built.

"The MTA has been trimming some service and things, and at the same time they've been expanding their programs. Hopefully they'll figure out how to get the money to operate and maintain them after they've been built," Taylor said. "There's less and less money to maintain things."

He suggested that once the lines were built, there would probably be the political will to raise money for operations because no one wants rail cars to be stuck in their tracks.

The proposed budget must still be approved by the Metro Board of Directors, and the document may change some. A public hearing is scheduled for Wednesday.

To see Metro's Measure R projects, go to: <http://goo.gl/91CzC>

[ari.bloomekatz@latimes.com](mailto:ari.bloomekatz@latimes.com), Copyright © 2011, [Los Angeles Times](#)