

# Metro Rail Is Dead—but L.A. Can Have Safe, Sensible Rapid Transit

By HENRY A. WAXMAN

Over the past year, it has become clear that the Rapid Transit District's plan for a Los Angeles subway system is short-sighted and seriously flawed. The project is beset with serious safety problems and questionable financing. It is unlikely that the system will ever be completed.

Despite RTD claims that Metro Rail is one of the most thoroughly studied public projects ever, major safety questions are uncovered every time there is an outside review.

After only two days of hearings, a panel of experts recently found 13 major safety issues that RTD had failed to consider. An RTD in-house technical team had just weeks before identified numerous other safety errors in the subway design.

These safety defects go to the very heart of the project and could lead to deadly ramifications for workers and subway patrons. It is not easy to dismiss RTD's failure to plan for drilling into abandoned oil wells along the tunnel path when we are told that an uncontrollable fire and explosion could result. Nor is it a minor matter that RTD had no plan to avoid cutting across active earthquake faults which might release explosive gases into the tunnel shaft. And it is disturbing to hear that RTD had to be told to monitor

all buildings along the route before and during tunneling to detect any buildup of methane gas.

The reviews that led to these findings and recommendations followed RTD testimony before a congressional subcommittee indicating that the proposed subway system was safe beyond question. What has RTD been studying for the past nine years?

Financing for the project is just as troubling as the safety issues. The Reagan Administration believes that the federal government cannot afford to pay its share of the project and plans to eliminate federal funding for the project before it gets under way. In fact, President Reagan has singled out the Los Angeles subway system as an example of wasteful government spending.

I strongly disagree with President Reagan's position that no federal funds should be available for any rapid transit system. Nevertheless, we must face the fact that the Gramm-Rudman budget crunch makes it unlikely that Congress will override the President and approve further funding for this project. This means that if the present Metro Rail plan goes forward, Los Angeles will be left saddled with the sole financial burden for a very expensive and potentially unsafe transit system.

We should not repeat the mistakes of other cities. New York City is just completing a \$1 billion subway tunnel that has a leaking roof and no connection point to the subway system. Pittsburgh suffered through many years of embarrassment with a multimillion dollar bridge that went nowhere. And most of the 20 stations of Miami's newly built subway are some distance from population centers and there is no stop within walking distance of the Orange Bowl.

The similarities between these projects and the L.A. Metro Rail are not limited to the fact that our subway would have no stop at Dodger Stadium, even though it would pass close by. A blind commitment to an ill-fated idea is not a prescription for success. It is the first sign of failure. It is time that RTD adopted a more realistic and flexible outlook towards the city's enormous mass transit problems.

The mayor and the City Council should immediately appoint a blue-ribbon panel that includes community representatives and the most qualified experts from around our nation to swiftly draft a rapid transit plan that meets the needs of the entire city.

The panel should consider all alternative systems, including subways in areas where it is safe to tunnel and light rail trains above ground that are less costly.

Routes should be elected solely on the basis of transportation needs, the protection of existing neighborhoods, and air quality considerations. Some key factors must be: traffic flow on freeways and streets, the special needs of low-income neighborhoods, a realistic assessment of automobile use and comprehensive feasibility studies that are completed before final decisions are made.

One idea that appears to enjoy strong public support is a light rail system along existing freeways. Many of us who have been in bumper-to-bumper traffic on our freeways would agree that a safe and quiet rapid train moving over the same route would be an attractive alternate method of travel.

Los Angeles is one of the world's great cities. Its transportation demands cannot be met by a plan plagued with both safety and financial problems. We should have a transit system that fully reflects the needs, ingenuity and resourcefulness of the people of our city. A renewed, coordinated effort could hasten the day when such a system is a reality.

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