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# Why Metro Rail is still unsafe

## POINT OF VIEW

The Herald Examiner encourages news-makers and others to submit their replies to this paper's editorials, Op-Ed page articles, columnists or news reports.

By Henry A. Waxman

**A** May 10 story in the Herald Examiner by Dave Leshner suggests that my opposition to a subway system under Wilshire Boulevard in Fairfax is based on politics rather than on safety concerns. This is definitely not the case.

It has been over two years since the methane gas explosion in the Ross Dress-for-Less store injured 22 people and frightened countless others in West Los Angeles. I, like so many others, stayed on edge until it was clear that the fires abated, gas pressures subsided and our neighbors' injuries were treated. I took seriously the City Task Force report following the explosion that warned the methane gas concentrations and the potential for a methane gas explosion were increasing in the Fairfax area.

Prior to this disaster, I was a strong supporter of Metro Rail's plans to construct and operate a subway system under Wilshire Boulevard. Following this alarming event, I carefully reviewed Metro Rail's plans for tunneling, listened to the warnings of the best engineers and geologists, and decided that I had to oppose the subway system in areas that the city had designated as "potential risk

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zone" and "high potential risk zone."

As an elected public official, representing many of those who would be most at risk if the subway system went forward, I had a responsibility to carefully evaluate Metro Rail's plans and take a public position concerning its safety. As a member of Congress, I also felt a duty to author legislation with Rep. Julian Dixon, D-L.A., to force RTD to review the entire plan for safety and to consider alternative routes that would serve the city of Los Angeles without endangering life and property.

I believe that the public record of RTD confirms that my strong opposition to tunneling in the Fairfax area remains the right course of action. Technical experts at the congressional hearing in Los Angeles testified that construction of Metro Rail along Wilshire Boulevard was "fraught with danger" and that they had doubts whether any present-day tunneling equipment could cope with an unexpected breakthrough into a large methane gas pocket. The subcommittee on health and the environment was told that if a large pocket ignited, a fireball could result and move down the tunnel with potentially fatal consequences.

Metro Rail's own engineers have concluded that "gas was present throughout most of the route and at a number of locations in quantities and under pressures that indicated health and fire hazards." A portion of the route has been described by Metro Rail geologists not just as "gassy," but as "extra hazardous," which means that there is a serious danger to the safety of workers.

The City Council's Technical Review Committee, which I helped establish, identified 13 major safety areas of concern in the plans for the initial subway segment that will tunnel through far less dangerous ground than the area that RTD had targeted in Fairfax. Indeed, RTD's own in-house technical review undertaken in response to my investigation identified additional safety concerns along the initial route.

I am not persuaded by a few post hoc statements from experts that tunneling should now go forward despite the safety concerns. It is their role to present the information and assess the danger, which they have done. The responsible government officials must then decide whether it makes sense to take the risk based on this information.

I do not believe that digging a storm drain is analogous to construction and operating a subway system, as some have suggested. The distinction is an obvious one — storm drains aren't designed and operated to transport thousands of people a day. To try to safeguard passengers from methane gas explosions, Metro Rail plans to wrap the tunnel in a plastic baggie and use the movement of trains to mix methane gas to non-explosive levels. What happens if the baggie breaks or a nervous patron lights a cigarette because a train is late?

RTD's John Dyer pledged to me that RTD would not tunnel through any area where a reasonable doubt exists as to the safety of the project's construction or operation. A federal law is on the books prohibiting any tunneling in these dangerous areas. But now that the public's memory has begun to fade concerning the methane gas explosion in the Fairfax area, Metro Rail backers think the timing is right to rehash tunneling and the safety question. The myopic commitment to tunnel down Wilshire Boulevard is exactly what led to my initial concern about their judgment.

How many of us would take an airline trip which had been identified as extremely hazardous, when we could merely avoid the flight and take a different one? It's no different in this instance. If the future of Los Angeles hinged on the subway system taking this exact route it might be a tougher question. But there are alternative routes that can be taken that are safer and will actually be far more efficient than this one. Metro Rail should look elsewhere. ■