



A Streetcar Named Dissension

Transportation of the Future vs. NIMBY of the Present in Cheviot Hills

By Naomi Glauberman

Next time you're stuck in traffic on Wilshire Boulevard, or Olympic, or the Santa Monica Freeway, try to imagine a better way. How about a light electric train that runs from downtown to Santa Monica. Sounds good — but where?

Miraculously enough, an open rail West-Side-to-downtown right-of-way exists: a still-available stretch of track along Exposition Boulevard that served as both

\$150 billion in funds available over the next thirty years, and light rail on the Exposition corridor fits right into the program. But, in response to the community opposition, support-

During a fractious recent hearing at Hamilton High School, the residents of these neighborhoods didn't seem impressed by the various options, matrixes, slides, and explanations offered by the LACTC. Hand-

written questions focused on noise, pollution, property values, graffiti, crime, and security. Minutes from the busiest freeway intersection in the world, a questioner suggested the population was not dense enough to warrant a light rail. As the meeting was disrupted by bells jangling for night school classes, a voice called out, "This is what it will be like," and the crowd roared its approval. If the trains are not noisy, their silence becomes a safety hazard. At Hamilton High, the audience also hooted Inge's report that several studies had shown that commuter transit lines often were beneficial to property values.

The homeowners along the right-of-way are indignant; they act violated, betrayed. Many have been fighting the ever-expanding Westside Pavilion for years, and they do not see the transportation corridor as alleviating congestion but as more unnecessary development.

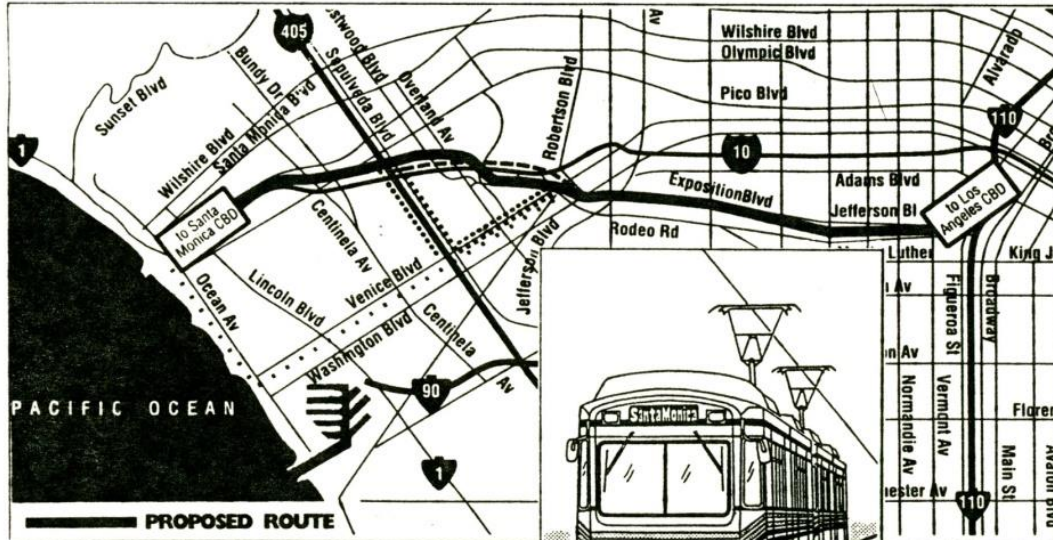
After the meeting, I took a Sunday morning walk along the right-of-way. Heading east from Sepulveda Boulevard, the track runs through a mix of industrial and residential neighborhoods; as it becomes predominantly residential, a street and high rows of oleanders separate the homes — mostly post-World War II — from the track that pre-dates them. There the right-of-way is one hundred feet wide from oleander to oleander. At

Westwood Boulevard, it widens to two hundred feet, enough room for a train line (which needs only about thirty feet), a bike path, and landscaping galore. At Overland, the tracks curve south and descend into a ravine lined with the spectacular remains of graffiti wars and graveyards of rusted spray cans far below the homes above. Nearby, a security guard dozes in his car. From the tunnel, the track climbs toward the roaring freeway. I had to wonder what noise and pollution people could be worrying about.

Not all residents are opposed, however. Jon Wiener, a historian and writer who has lived in Rancho Park for twelve years, thinks light rail "would be great for our neighborhood — it could get us downtown, or to the beach — and it would ease the terrible traffic problems around the Westside Pavilion." Although Wiener has supported the homeowners associations in past protests, he thinks their current stance is laden with code words. "They claim the train would bring 'graffiti' to the neighborhood. There's another word for their position. I'd call it racism. They're preoccupied with the possibility that nonwhite kids will get off the train in their neighborhood and lower their property values."

Whatever the residents' real anxieties, the opportunity exists: a corridor in which anything — trains, trolley, light rails, electric buses, parkways, bikeways — is possible without major demolition, condemnation, or excavation. The LACTC will be holding community meetings through next year to decide what will eventually be done, leading up to the preparation of an environmental impact statement. ■

Further info: Carol Inge, LACTC: 244-6896. Contact the Exposition Rail Committee, "an independent citizens group volunteering time in support of the Exposition right-of-way's best use as a light rail line serving the Westside," at 394-3799.



a commuter and freight line for almost a century. The city of Santa Monica is enthusiastic about putting it back into service as an electric passenger line. But the plan must overcome objections from homeowners associations in Rancho Park and Cheviot Hills, which have responded as if nuclear waste might be dumped in their back yards.

Despite the objections, the Los Angeles County Transportation Commission (LACTC) bought from Southern Pacific the right-of-way, offered for sale two years ago, to "preserve our options," according to Carol Inge, project director of a planning study for the corridor. As a result of voter referendums and bond measures in support of public transit, the county will have

ed by Councilman Zev Yaroslavsky, who has chosen this issue to get tough on rather than the Westside Pavilion, Beverly Center, Farmer's Market, or Westwood overdevelopment, LACTC is now saying that a rail route along the Exposition corridor is just one of many possible alternatives. These include four additional routes, all swinging a wide, expensive loop around Rancho Park and Cheviot Hills.