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## **CIRCULATION ELEMENT WHITE PAPER NO. 2**

### **WILSHIRE CORRIDOR CONGESTION**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

From an historic perspective, Wilshire Boulevard has been the western Los Angeles region's primary thoroughfare, combining entertainment and shopping districts surrounded by superior residential areas as it traverses from Grand Avenue in downtown Los Angeles through Beverly Hills and its Business Triangle to Ocean Avenue in Santa Monica. As the region's freeway network was implemented, especially the Santa Monica Freeway, the traffic load on Wilshire Boulevard and other parallel arterials was relieved for a period of 20 years or so until regional growth inevitably overwhelmed the freeway system and traffic diverted back to the arterial street system.

As the Westside has evolved into a job-rich subregion, traditional commute patterns have changed, with the morning rush hour on the Santa Monica Freeway heavier westbound than eastbound (toward downtown Los Angeles). A similar traffic pattern is experienced on Wilshire Boulevard. Notwithstanding this flow reversal, Wilshire Boulevard continues to function as a regional arterial connecting downtown Los Angeles to the ocean in Santa Monica. As such, its traffic is influenced not only by development located on the corridor in the City, but profoundly by development throughout the region. Wilshire Boulevard is the most densely built corridor in Los Angeles County, as well as in the western United States.

#### **BACKGROUND**

Currently, the average daily traffic on Wilshire Boulevard is more than 46,000 just east of Santa Monica Boulevard. These volumes reflect about a 15 percent increase over conditions in 1974 when traffic levels were at about 42,000 vehicles per day. In 1967 the average daily traffic was about 36,000 vehicles per day, reflecting a 35 percent increase in the 38 years from 1967 to current conditions. It should be noted that traffic levels were actually the highest in the 1980s.

As documented in the Technical Background Report (TBR), current levels of service (LOS) along Wilshire Boulevard within the City are generally most congested near the eastern and western City limits. For example, the intersection of La Cienega and Wilshire Boulevards is currently LOS F in the morning, LOS D at midday and LOS E in the evening. The intersection of Wilshire and Santa Monica Boulevards is LOS D/E throughout the day. Whittier Drive/Wilshire Boulevard is LOS F in the morning and evening and LOS E at midday.

During the time period from the 1900s to the 1980s, the Wilshire Corridor became the densest population and employment corridor west of the Mississippi River and was thus touted as the most logical route for a rail rapid transit subway. In 1984, the Southern California Rapid Transit District (SCRTD) released an environmental document for a subway system from downtown Los Angeles west under Wilshire Boulevard, turning north along Fairfax Avenue and then heading to the San Fernando Valley. The methane gas explosion at Ross Dress for Less near Fairfax

Avenue and Third Street in 1985 put an end to this plan, ultimately leading to the truncated Metro Red Line with a western terminus at Western. As a result of construction-related problems associated with the truncated Metro Red Line project, Los Angeles County Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky sponsored Proposition A on the November 1998 ballot. This measure was passed and prohibits use of Propositions A and C transit sales tax receipts (totaling 1%) from being used to construct subways in Los Angeles County.

Currently, Wilshire Boulevard serves as a major regional transit bus corridor, as indicated by the following on-board passenger loads from the TBR:

- Wilshire/Santa Monica: Approximately 5,170 passengers in both directions during the morning peak hour and 4,900 during the evening peak hour.
- Wilshire/Beverly: Approximately 4,520 passengers in both directions during the morning peak hour and 3,820 during the evening peak hour.
- Wilshire/La Cienega: Approximately 5,240 passengers in both directions during the morning peak hour and 4,360 during the evening peak hour.

Thus, there is no doubt that Wilshire Boulevard is a regionally significant transit corridor.

As the regional rail system comprised of heavy, light and commuter rail continued to expand, the Westside Cities continued to be unserved, except for the future prospect of the Exposition Light Rail Transit (LRT) line from downtown Los Angeles to Culver City, and ultimately to Santa Monica (see Figure 1). It should be noted that while the Expo LRT line is parallel to the Wilshire Corridor, its location is such that its completion would do little to relieve traffic congestion on Wilshire Boulevard.

In the past five years, Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) adopted an initiative to implement bus rapid transit (BRT) in the county, rolling out the Wilshire-Whittier and Ventura Boulevard Metro Rapid lines in June 2000, concurrent with the opening of the Metro Red Line to the San Fernando Valley. Metro Rapid should be considered “BRT-Lite” in that it operates in mixed-flow lanes, albeit assisted by traffic signal priority and roughly one-mile station spacing. The MTA’s goal is to advance the Wilshire Metro Rapid Route 720 incrementally to full BRT status, including peak-hour dedicated lanes, such as the one-mile stretch in West Los Angeles from Federal Avenue to Centinela Avenue. A proposal for an interim test of this concept is currently under consideration by the City of Beverly Hills and decision makers must determine if the potential benefits in reduced traffic outweigh the potential impacts of additional congestion on the Wilshire corridor and adjacent alternate routes through the City.

While transit signal priority may be permanently implemented along Wilshire Boulevard through Beverly Hills, if the proposed BRT test is deemed successful by the City, it remains to be seen if further stretches of the 26-mile long route can be converted to peak-hour dedicated lane operation. Ironically, the 1984 subway environmental document forecast that if the subway were not built, it would lead to a train of buses along Wilshire Boulevard. The current Line 720 Metro Rapid service alone has extremely short a.m. peak headways eastbound leaving the Vermont Metro Red Line Station. As congestion increases, MTA will be forced to add even

more buses to maintain service and to meet the Consent Decree with the Bus Riders Union<sup>1</sup>. It must be emphasized that increased bus service on Wilshire Boulevard is only an interim solution for increasing transit ridership until a subway is constructed that serves this area.

## **SIGNIFICANCE TO BEVERLY HILLS**

While regionally significant, Wilshire Boulevard is of crucial importance to Beverly Hills, as it represents front door access to the Business Triangle, as well as serving development east of the Triangle. The most recent results from license plate surveys indicate that about 25-40 percent of the traffic on Wilshire is regional through trips with no origin or destination in Beverly Hills. Therefore, approximately 60-75 percent (or roughly 28,000-35,000 vehicles of the approximate total of 44,000 per day) have origins or destinations within Beverly Hills.

Thus, the conflicting objectives for Beverly Hills are the need to maintain access to the City, while at the same time facilitating regional through trips so as to minimize the shifting of such traffic to residential areas. To maintain a high level of access to the City, strategies would logically include increasing capacity on Wilshire Boulevard, increasing capacity on parallel routes, or improving the traffic flow on each of these routes with the limited roadway capacity currently available. The other strategy is the essence of the currently ongoing Intelligent Transportation System (ITS) program by the City's Transportation Department. While recognizing the obvious benefits of increased traffic flow through improvements to the traffic signal system and driver information systems, there is a limit to the magnitude of the expected improvements. It cannot be considered a long-term strategy that will allow for the type of growth and development expected in the City and its neighboring communities, but it is a cost-effective measure that is especially attractive because of the availability of federal and state transportation funds for its implementation.

Capacity increases on routes parallel to Wilshire Boulevard but in the same travel corridor is a viable and attractive measure that would include Olympic Boulevard and possibly Santa Monica Boulevard. While Santa Monica Boulevard is the topic of another White Paper in this series that will further address this issue, consideration of Olympic Boulevard must recognize the limitations of this option relative to the overall objective of increasing mobility. While increases to the capacity of this corridor would help in moving overall traffic associated with Wilshire Boulevard and would therefore serve the needs of the regional through traffic, it would not provide much assistance to serving the needs of the Business Triangle, where a high percentage of Wilshire Boulevard traffic is destined. In order to preserve or expand the traffic-carrying capacity of Olympic Boulevard, consideration of the impact on traffic flow should be included in any land use discussions about development along the street.

Increasing the capacity of Wilshire Boulevard would certainly achieve the objectives of maintaining good access to the City, providing for the movement of regional traffic through the city, and ensuring that growth in traffic volumes does not lead to diversion of this traffic onto adjacent local streets in the residential neighborhoods. Increasing the highway capacity of Wilshire Boulevard, however, is not only contrary to the overall long-term objective for the City, it is in many ways counterproductive since it will likely result only in moving the traffic bottlenecks to other locations in or adjacent to the City, and serve to attract more through traffic. Increasing the people-moving capacity of Wilshire Boulevard with transit strategies achieves the City's

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<sup>1</sup> MTA and the Bus Riders Union agreed to an out-of-court settlement requiring that MTA meet specified overcrowding standards on its buses.

objective without resulting in the various negative impacts. For long-term congestion relief on Wilshire Boulevard that achieves the City's objectives, active planning and engagement for future transit systems will be necessary by City leaders.

## **TRAVEL FORECASTS FOR THE WESTSIDE**

As documented in the *Mid-Cities Westside Transit Corridor Study: Re-Evaluation/Major Investment Study (MIS) Report* (MTA, February 2000), between 1998 and 2000, the roughly 107 square mile study area (downtown Los Angeles to the ocean, Manchester to Sunset) experienced an increase of approximately 400,000 people and 200,000 jobs, resulting in a home-work trip growth of 40 percent. In addition to this robust growth, the Westside area, which includes Beverly Hills and already has a population density of 14,000 persons per square mile and an employment density of 9,000 jobs per square mile, has the highest concentration of the region's designated activity centers and an existing concentration of transit-supportive land uses (almost 30 percent of the total). There are no committed east-west transportation improvements to serve this future growth other than the possibility of the Expo LRT Line, which would not materially affect traffic congestion on Wilshire Boulevard.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR GENERAL PLAN UPDATE**

It is clear that improvements in public transit offer the best, and perhaps only, means to tame the congestion along Wilshire Boulevard, which is a regionally significant transit-oriented corridor. In 1997, the transit usage as a percentage of all trips on the Westside was almost 14 percent, which is double the county average. This percentage has most likely increased with the success of the Wilshire-Whittier Metro Rapid Line 720 and other Metro Rapid lines added since 2000.

As the region in general and the Westside in particular continue to grow, congestion will increase on Wilshire Boulevard and the current roughly one-third of regional through trips is likely to increase as the freeway system becomes more congested. This increasing congestion will adversely affect public transit systems along Wilshire Boulevard, resulting in slower average speeds and the need to add buses to maintain service levels. The following are the key implications relative to the General Plan Update:

1. The Metro Rapid Line 720 and other bus services will continue as the only viable public transit service for the foreseeable future but should only be viewed as interim solutions. The City should explore the potential of peak hour dedicated bus lanes from Doheny Drive to San Vicente Boulevard, seeking to minimize localized impacts and weighing any potential impacts against improvement to mobility.
2. The future possibility of a western Metro Red Line subway extension should be acknowledged and actively supported by the City.<sup>2</sup> Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has publicly noted the need to extend the subway to the sea. Recent estimates by MTA suggest a cost of \$4.8 billion (in 2015 dollars) to extend the subway from Western Avenue to Ocean Avenue. In addition, a panel of experts has found that the subway can be safely built through the methane gas zone and Congressman Henry Waxman now supports the project. In order achieve the best

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<sup>2</sup> The City previously endorsed the subway extension through adoption of the *Westside Mobility Study*.

possible outcome for Beverly Hills, the City needs to play an active role in studying route alignment and station locations and advocating for that outcome.

3. Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) should be considered along the Wilshire Corridor in the Land Use Element at appropriate locations. Properly located, such development can capture up to 25 percent of the home-work trips. Further, shoppers are drawn to retail stores well served by transit. The current Metro Rapid Line 720 on Wilshire Boulevard has stops in Beverly Hills at La Cienega, Robertson, Beverly Drive, and Santa Monica Boulevards. Each of these Metro Rapid locations represents possible candidates for subway station locations. Therefore, TOD nodes should be evaluated in the area surrounding these locations.
4. In conjunction with analysis of the Santa Monica Boulevard corridor, the City needs to study further a Wilshire Boulevard/Santa Monica Boulevard grade-separation project in the context of the level of congestion relief offered compared to other alternatives and within the context of a potential subway extension. For example, a grade separation involving a sunken roadway would require any subway alignment through the intersection to be built much deeper and affect possible station locations.



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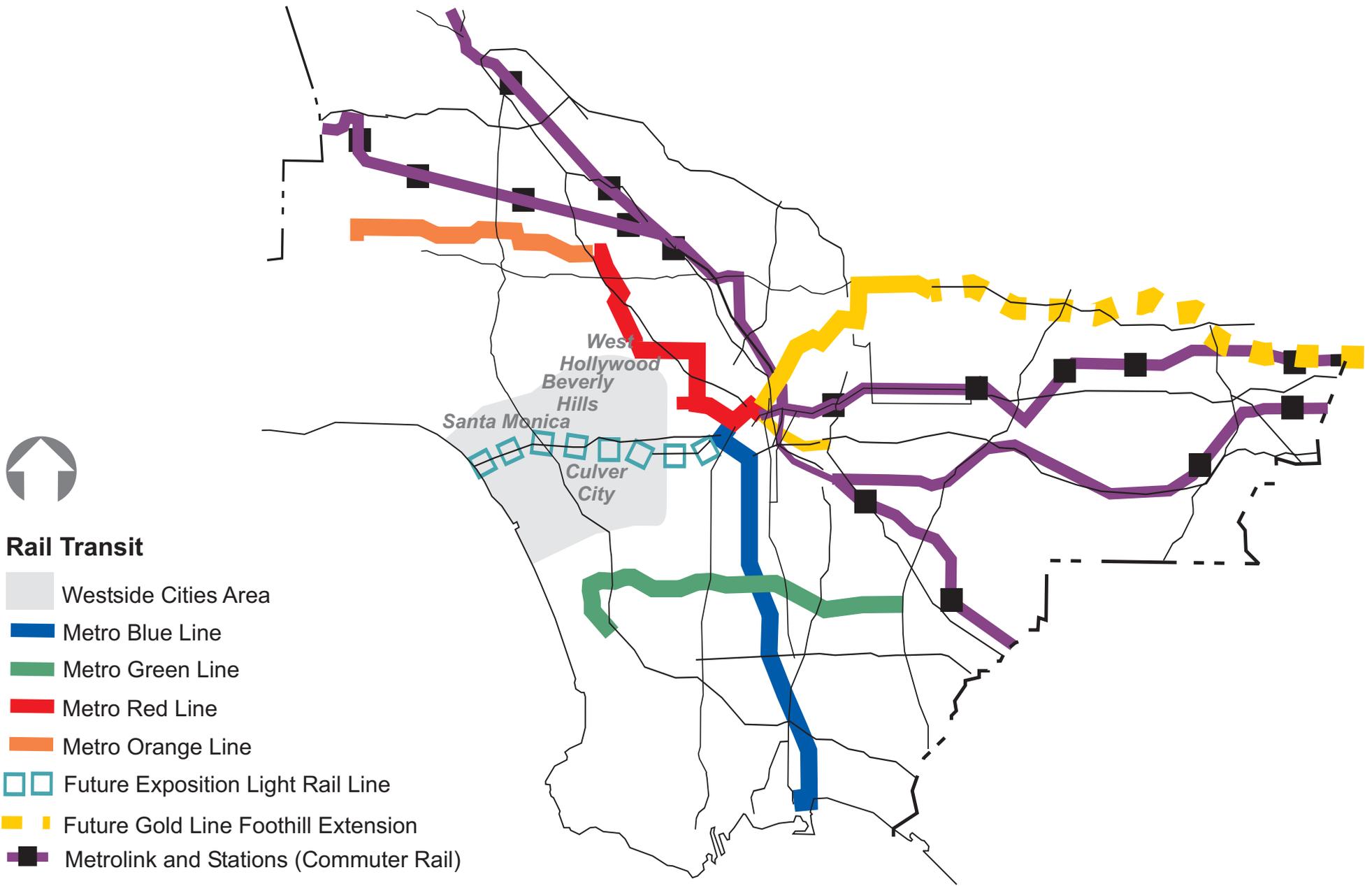
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**FIGURE 1 - REGIONAL RAIL SYSTEM**