



Board Report

File #: 2020-0024, File Type: Project

Agenda Number: 10.

REVISED
PLANNING AND PROGRAMMING COMMITTEE
NOVEMBER 18, 2020

SUBJECT: EAST SAN FERNANDO VALLEY LIGHT RAIL TRANSIT FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT

ACTION: APPROVE RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION

CONSIDER:

- A. Approving the East San Fernando Valley Transit Corridor Project (Project), an at-grade light rail transit (LRT) line with 14 stations;
- B. Certifying, in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act, the Final Environmental Impact Report, which includes an option to construct the Project in phases;
- C. Adopting, in accordance with CEQA, the:
 - 1. Findings of Fact and Statement of Overriding Considerations, and
 - 2. Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Plan;
- D. Authorizing the Chief Executive Officer to file a Notice of Determination with the Los Angeles County Clerk and the State of California Clearinghouse; and
- E. Instructing staff, in coordination with the FTA, to work with the Southern California Regional Rail Authority (SCRRA) and the City of San Fernando to address new issues raised along the 2.5-mile shared railroad ROW.
 - Report back to the Board on any supplemental environmental clearance, design evaluations and associated traffic analysis needed. This will be done prior to proceeding with any construction activities on this section of the alignment.
- F. Instructing staff, in coordination with the City of Los Angeles to identify a preferred First/Last Mile parallel bike route to replace the existing bike lanes on Van Nuys Boulevard which would be displaced by the LRT project in the Panorama City and Pacoima communities.
 - Report back to the Board with a plan to provide the interim replacement bike lanes during the construction period and permanent replacement bike lanes by the time of the opening of the East SFV Transit Project.

ISSUE

The Final Environmental Impact Statement/Environmental Impact Report (EIS/EIR) has completed all necessary steps to be considered for Certification by the Board in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The Executive Summary is included in Attachment A. Certification also includes approval of the Findings of Fact and Statement of Overriding Conditions (Attachment B) and the Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Plan (Attachment C). The Project is a Measure M and Measure R project that is contained in the 2009 Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP) and the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG), Regional Transportation Plan (RTP).

Approval of the project environmental document also provides for the inclusion of an Interim Operating Segment (IOS) that would extend along Van Nuys Boulevard from the Metro G Line (Orange) to San Fernando Road and a second segment extending along the railroad right-of-way between Van Nuys Boulevard and the Sylmar/San Fernando Metrolink Station. Staff is recommending continued study of the second segment in response to comments received during the Final EIS/EIR Public Review Period.

BACKGROUND

In June 2018, the Metro Board adopted the Project's Locally Preferred Alternative (LPA), a fully at-grade 9.2-mile LRT line with 14 at-grade stations. More specifically, the Board-selected LPA will extend light rail service north, from the Metro G Line (Orange), 6.7 miles in the median of Van Nuys Boulevard to the intersection of Van Nuys Boulevard and San Fernando Road. The alignment would then transition onto the existing railroad right-of-way adjacent to San Fernando Road and continue 2.5 miles to the Sylmar/San Fernando Metrolink Station.

A detailed description of the Project is provided in the attached Executive Summary to the Final EIS/EIR (Attachment A). The Final EIS/EIR is available on the Project website at: www.metro.net/projects/east-sfv <<http://www.metro.net/projects/east-sfv>>.

DISCUSSION

California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA)

Metro, as the CEQA lead agency and proponent for the Project, has, in coordination with the cities of Los Angeles and San Fernando, completed an environmental impact report (EIR) for the proposed Project. If the Metro Board certifies the EIR and approves the proposed Project, thereby completing the CEQA environmental clearance, the Project will be eligible to commence right-of-way acquisition, utility relocation, and other construction activities.

CEQA requires that Metro balance, as applicable, the economic, social, technological, and other benefits of the Project against its unavoidable impacts when considering project approval. CEQA Guidelines Section 15091(a) states that if the specific economic, legal, social, technological or other

benefits of the Project outweigh the unavoidable adverse effects, those effects may be considered acceptable. The Board must find that notwithstanding the disclosure of these significant and unavoidable impacts, there are specific overriding reasons for approving this Project and that these reasons serve to override and outweigh the Project's significant unavoidable effects. CEQA requires that support be provided, in writing, of the specific reasons for considering a project acceptable when significant impacts cannot be avoided or substantially lessened. These findings are included in the Project's Statement of Overriding Considerations (Attachment B).

Section 21086.6 of the California Public Resources Code requires that public agencies approving a project with an EIR, adopt a Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Plan (MMRP). The purpose of the MMRP is to ensure that the mitigation measures identified in the Final EIR that mitigate the potentially significant environmental effects of the Project are, in fact, properly carried out. Metro is responsible for assuring full compliance with the provisions of the MMRP (Attachment C).

Prior to the selection of the Project's LPA, Metro released the Draft EIS/EIR for a 60-day public review and comment period, which were during the months of September and October 2017. During that period, Metro hosted five Public Hearings at which the public was given the opportunity to state their Project likes, dislikes, concerns and/or needs. All meetings were attended by a court reporter to ensure oral comments were documented. A Spanish interpreter was on hand as well as other bilingual Project staff. During the Project's 60-day public review and comment period, more than 900 individuals provided more than 1,700 questions, comments, and concerns pertaining to the Project. The majority of the comments received expressed support for LRT, but there were a number of comments expressing Project concerns. The four most common concerns were as follows:

- 1) Opposition to Maintenance and Storage Facility (MSF) Option A
- 2) Traffic congestion concerns
- 3) Right-of-way acquisition concerns
- 4) Pedestrian and bicycle access

Responses to all comments received during the Project's 60-day Public Review and Comment period were drafted and are contained in Appendix A2 of the Final EIS/EIR.

National Environmental Protection Act (NEPA)

Metro has worked in coordination with the Federal Transit Administration (FTA) which is the lead agency for the NEPA clearance including the Environmental Impact Statement and Record of Decision (ROD). The NEPA clearance is necessary to ensure the environmental document is inclusive of all information required to meet federal environmental guidance and to allow the Project to be eligible for federal funding. Metro may seek financial assistance from FTA for the Project to carry out the Project's engineering and construction. If FTA provides financial assistance for final design and construction of the Project, FTA will require that Metro design and construct the Project as presented in the Final EIS/EIR and in the ROD. Although no new federal funds have been identified for the Project, by working with the FTA to complete the NEPA portion of the environmental document, the Project could be well positioned to compete if any Federal funding opportunities become available.

Metro G Line Connection:

In June 2018, when the Board selected the LPA, the Project's southern terminus was located at Bessemer Street, an east/west roadway just north of the Metro G Line. At the time of the writing of the Draft EIS/EIR, the decision to grade-separate the Metro G Line had not been made. Therefore, at the June 2018 Board meeting, Project staff was directed to work with Metro G Line project staff to develop a safe/seamless connection. In response, staff reviewed a number of alternatives and determined that the location that provided the greatest safety and comfort would be a station directly under the Metro G Line with connections to both east- and west-bound Metro G Line buses via stairs, escalators, and elevators. A concept drawing of the station is provided (Attachment D).

Grade Crossing Safety Study:

In response to a letter received from the SCRRA, Metro completed a Grade Crossing Safety Study along the 2.5-mile northern, shared railroad right-of-way section of the alignment. The Study's conclusion was that although no system is as safe as grade-separating train traffic from the roadway, with lessons learned from previous Metro constructed LRT projects and new safety equipment that would be an integral Project component, that the Project could safely cross intersections at grade.

Public Release of the Final EIS/EIR

The Final EIS/EIR was initially released on October 2, 2020, for a 30-day public review and comment period. Metro extended the public review period to 45 days to conclude on November 17, 2020 to allow more time to engage with non-English-speaking stakeholders. All comments received during the public review period will be summarized and presented to the Metro Board of Directors before Certification is considered.

Community Outreach:

Due to COVID-19 and public health directives from the County of Los Angeles, all Metro projects and programs are conducting virtual outreach in fall 2020. In response, the Project team developed a robust outreach program to maximize awareness of the final planning phase of the Project. Beginning in August 2020, over 400 bus car cards were displayed on Metro buses operating in the San Fernando Valley to reach current transit riders. Weekday bus ridership on Van Nuys Boulevard is well over 8,000 riders per day as of fall 2020, allowing the car cards to be a very effective way to educate future riders of the Project.

To engage local residents and businesses along the corridor, two rounds of 20,000 flyers were delivered door-to-door and Eblasts were sent out to over 3,400 contacts in the stakeholder database. In addition, a Project post was placed on NextDoor that was sent to 280,000 residential accounts. Metro Project staff gave 15 presentations and delivered announcements to nine neighborhood councils, reaching approximately 450 stakeholders. Metro staff also distributed more than 3,000 flyers to elected officials and Community Based Organizations (CBOs). Federal, state, county and city elected officials also helped promote Metro's community meetings via their social media channels.

To make the contents of the Final EIS/EIR available and more user friendly, a web-based platform was developed in English and Spanish that allows visitors to watch a Project video, learn more about the Project and take a brief survey. The platform can be accessed at:

[<https://www.metro.net/projects/east-sfv/esfv-learning-tool/>](https://www.metro.net/projects/east-sfv/esfv-learning-tool/).

Two virtual community meetings were hosted by Metro, including one conducted entirely in Spanish. One hundred seven attended the first virtual community meeting, and thirty-three people attended the second meeting. For those without access to a computer, a phone number was provided that enabled participants to listen in to the presentation and ask questions via text-messaging. Interpretation was available in Armenian for the first meeting and in English for the second meeting, and in other languages by request.

During the public review period, agencies and the public were able to submit comments and/or questions directly to Metro via the project website, via email and via the project hotline. During the two community meetings, approximately 85 questions and comments were received. A summary of public questions and comments received through November 17 will be tabulated and presented at the December Board Meeting.

First/Last Mile Plan and Replacement Bike Lanes

During the preparation of the Final EIS/EIR, Metro prepared a First/Last Mile (FLM) Plan. The FLM Plan identifies barriers for the FLM portions of an individual's journey as well as projects for people walking and people on bikes and their rough order of magnitude costs. These projects, if implemented, will strengthen the FLM journey for Metro customers traveling to and from a Project Station. The FLM Plan also provides an adaptable vision for addressing FLM improvements in a systematic way, and results in data and information to justify taking those actions. The recommended FLM Plan is being submitted as a separate report for Board approval.

The Final EIS/EIR has disclosed that the existing bike lanes located on Van Nuys Boulevard in the communities of Panorama City and Pacoima would be displaced by the East San Fernando Valley Project. The First/Last Mile Plan identified several alternative locations that could serve as replacement bike lanes for those displaced on Van Nuys Boulevard. Metro will work with the City of Los Angeles to identify a preferred alternative from the East San Fernando Valley First/Last Mile Plan that would provide comparable service to the displaced bike lanes. Once identified, the ESFV LRT Project would implement the replacement bike lanes by the time of the opening of the East SFV Transit project.

Project Cost

The Measure M Expenditure Plan allocates \$1.33 billion (2015\$) for the Project, which according to the Measure M guidelines can be inflated to \$1.6 billion (2018\$). Project cost estimates are being updated during the Project's ongoing preliminary engineering and will be reported to the Board in 2021.

Interim Operating Segment

To ensure the objectives of the Project are met in a timely manner and avoid delays due to the timing of funding, a Project Interim Operating Segment (IOS) has been included in the Project's Final EIS/EIR. The IOS would enable work to begin sooner and it should be noted that Metro is proceeding with IOSs on all Measure M projects to provide the Metro Board with flexibility in determining the most efficient and cost-effective manner to implement projects.

If the Metro Board approves the recommendation to proceed with the IOS, the first phase would extend along the same median Van Nuys Boulevard alignment and have the same LRT design

features and operating and service characteristics as those described for the LPA; however, the IOS would only extend as far north as San Fernando Road and the proposed Van Nuys/San Fernando Station, rather than continuing 2.5 miles within the existing railroad right-of-way to the Sylmar/San Fernando Metrolink station, as would occur under the LPA. Therefore, it would have a smaller project footprint than the LPA and would include 11 stations of the 14 stations proposed under the LPA. As per Metro Board direction, it would remain Metro's intent to build the remaining northern 2.5 miles of the LPA located within the existing railroad right-of-way from the Van Nuys/San Fernando station to the Sylmar/San Fernando Metrolink station.

A schedule for completing the second phase (i.e., the northern 2.5 miles) would be contingent upon securing the necessary funding, which remains to be determined.

SCRRA and City of San Fernando Concerns

Since the release of the Final EIS/EIR, the Southern California Regional Rail Authority (SCRRA or Metrolink) and the City of San Fernando have voiced continuing concerns pertaining to plans in development (Brighton to Roxford) that might add a fourth track between Van Nuys Boulevard and the Sylmar/San Fernando Metrolink Station at some point in the future that has not yet been determined. At the time of the drafting of the Grade Crossing Safety Study, the Brighton to Roxford project did not have a funding source and as such, there was some question as to whether the project would be constructed. Therefore, the Grade Crossing Safety Study reviewed the impacts of a three-track alignment. Due to SCRRA and City of San Fernando concerns, the Grade Crossing Safety Study would need to be updated to determine the impacts of four tracks at intersections adjacent to the grade crossings that are north of Van Nuys Boulevard.

If the Board approves the IOS and instructs staff to move forward with the first phase of the Project, right-of-way acquisition and utility relocation along Van Nuys Boulevard between the Metro G Line and San Fernando Road could be initiated in 2021. This strategy may also be advantageous for the Project's second phase as it would provide time to continue to work with the SCRRA and the City of San Fernando to address identified concerns along the railroad right-of-way.

To better assess safety and traffic impacts that would result from a fourth track being considered by the SCRRA for the San Fernando Rail Right-of-Way, between Van Nuys Boulevard and the Sylmar/San Fernando Metrolink Station, supplemental design, traffic/safety analysis, and environmental assessments are recommended. Staff will coordinate with the SCRRA and the City of San Fernando to determine the types of analysis that are best suited to forecast the impacts and make design recommendations. Once supplemental studies are agreed upon, staff will return to the Board to seek authorization and budget.

Equity Platform

Board certification of the Project is consistent with the goals and objectives outlined in the Metro Equity Platform Framework in that the Project alignment is located in a disadvantaged, underserved community where access to premium transit service is limited. There is a high concentration of minority communities residing in the Project study area including a significant concentration of Hispanic or Latino 71.7% (35% higher than the average for the City of Los Angeles and 24% higher than the County). Approximately 17.5% of the households in the study area are below the poverty

level, which is 0.2% higher than the City and 3.5% higher than the County. The Project will provide residents with a direct connection to the Metro G Line as well as with Metrolink's Ventura and Antelope Valley Lines. The alignment will provide residents with premium transit service to access employment, health, and educational opportunities, which otherwise would be difficult to reach. The FLM Project component will promote equity and sustainability by connecting underserved neighborhoods to the Metro transit network. The community was included in the process of identifying the pedestrian, bicycling, landscaping and other FLM enhancements that are included in the FLM Plan.

DETERMINATION OF SAFETY IMPACT

Recommended actions will not have any impact on the safety of Metro customers and/or employees because this Project is in the planning phase and no capital or operational impacts result from this Board action.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

With Board approval of the Project Definition and certification of the Final EIS/EIR, the CEQA process will be complete. It is anticipated that FTA staff will issue a ROD in January 2021 which will conclude the environmental document and as such, additional budget is not required at this time. Project staff will continue to coordinate with the SCRRA and the City of San Fernando, as well as with the FTA, to determine what new studies are appropriate for the Project's northern 2.5 miles along the San Fernando Rail Right of Way. Once those conversations are complete, staff will return to the Board with a request for funding for additional analysis and if appropriate, supplemental environmental analysis and design.

Approval of the Project Definition and subsequent ROD will allow the Project to continue with ongoing pre-construction activities, including the purchase of right of way, additional design, and utilities relocation in anticipation of a design-build contract award. The Project has capital funding programmed in the Metro financial forecast based on the cost estimate prepared for the Measure M Expenditure Plan of approximately \$1.6 billion in year of expenditure dollars. The funding includes a fixed allocation of Measure R and Measure M funds, as well as state grant funds that have been awarded to the Project. The estimated cost to complete the Project could be higher as the level of design increases and as pre-construction activities are completed. In the event the Project capital cost exceeds currently identified funding, Metro may need to evaluate value engineering, scope reductions including an IOS, and potential additional funding sources.

IMPLEMENTATION OF STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS

The Project is consistent with the Metro Vision 2028 Strategic Plan goals by addressing key transportation challenges in the Project area, including growing travel demand, travel times, traffic congestion and limited connections to the regional rail system.

- The Project is aligned with Vision 2028 Goal #1 - Provide High Quality Mobility Options That Will Enable People to Spend Less Time Traveling. It will provide a high quality mobility option that will improve, travel time, mobility, transit access, and connectivity to Metro's regional transit system. The

Project area experiences heavy traffic congestion, slow speeds, and unreliable travel times along its major streets during peak travel periods. These conditions are expected to worsen over time. By 2040, the Project is expected to reduce travel time for transit passengers from 48 minutes to approximately 30 minutes between the Metro G Line (Orange) Station and the Sylmar/San Fernando Metrolink Station. The ESFV Transit Corridor traverses several densely populated environmental justice communities. Many residents of these communities are transit-dependent. The Project is a major transit investment that will enhance mobility, access, and connectivity for ESFV communities and will reduce dependence on the automobile.

- The Project also supports Goal #3 - Enhance Communities through Mobility and Enhanced Access to Opportunity. It will connect communities in the San Fernando Valley to the regional Metro rail network. This Project will expand access to jobs, major activity centers, including educational and medical facilities, and recreational opportunities within the Project area and throughout the Los Angeles region.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

The Board could defer or not approve the Project Definition, certify the Final EIS/EIR or adopt the Findings and Statement of Overriding Considerations, as well as the MMRP. However, this action is not recommended as it would jeopardize the Project schedule which, according to the Measure M expenditure plan, is to be in revenue operations by or before 2028. The current schedule also has right-of-way acquisitions and utility relocations commencing in 2021 and a design/build contract being awarded in 2022. Delaying the Project would delay these efforts and could add cost.

NEXT STEPS

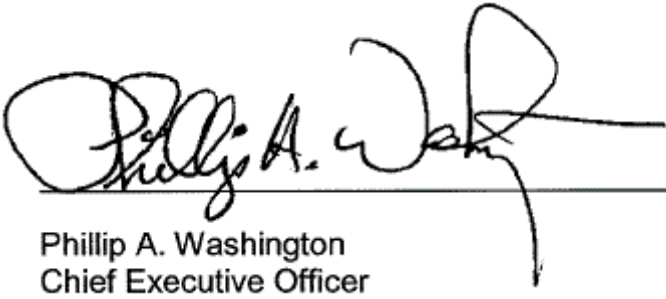
Upon Board approval, Project staff will file the Notice of Determination for the Project with the Los Angeles County Clerk and State of California Clearinghouse and will work with the FTA to ensure the timely issuance of a ROD. We will continue to coordinate with the SCRRA and the City of San Fernando to address new issues that pertain to the northern 2.5-mile shared railroad right-of-way segment of the alignment. We will return to the Board with any new supplemental recommendations necessary to address SCRRA and City of San Fernando concerns.

ATTACHMENTS

- Attachment A - Executive Summary
- Attachment B - Findings of Fact and Statement of Overriding Considerations
- Attachment C - Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Plan
- Attachment D - Metro G Line/Project Connection

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