



Board Report

File #: 2021-0667, File Type: Project

Agenda Number: 10.

PLANNING AND PROGRAMMING COMMITTEE
NOVEMBER 17, 2021

**SUBJECT: ANTELOPE VALLEY LINE SERVICE AND CAPACITY IMPROVEMENT PROJECT
FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT**

ACTION: APPROVE RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATION

CONSIDER:

- A. CERTIFYING the Final Environmental Impact Report for the Antelope Valley Line Service and Capacity Improvement Project, in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and file the Notice of Determination for the Project with the Los Angeles County Clerk and the State of California Clearinghouse;
- B. ADOPTING, in accordance with CEQA, the:
 - 1. Findings of Fact and Statement of Overriding Considerations, and
 - 2. Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Plan; and
- C. FINDING that the Project meets all Public Resources Code Section 21080 (b)(10) requirements and is declared statutorily exempt under CEQA, and AUTHORIZING Metro staff to file the Notice of Exemption for the Project with Los Angeles County Clerk and the State of California Clearinghouse.

ISSUE

In partnership with Metrolink and the North Los Angeles County Transportation Coalition, the Final Environmental Impact Report for the Antelope Valley Line Service and Capacity Improvement Project has completed all necessary steps to be considered by the Board in accordance with the California Environmental Quality Act. Staff is requesting certification of the Final EIR, including approval of the Findings of Fact and Statement of Overriding Considerations (Attachment A) and the Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Plan (Attachment B). Staff is also requesting approval of the findings that the project is statutorily exempt and that the Board authorize a notice of exemption.

BACKGROUND

The Antelope Valley Line Service and Capacity Improvements project proposes the expansion of 30 minute bi-directional commuter rail service to the City of Santa Clarita and hourly service to the City of Lancaster through four infrastructure improvement projects collectively required to facilitate the proposed service increase. The four infrastructure improvement projects are Balboa Double Track Extension, Canyon Siding Extension, Lancaster Terminal Improvements, and the Brighton to McGinley Double Track. It is important to note the Brighton to McGinley Double Track Improvements have already been environmentally cleared under CEQA through the Brighton to Roxford Double Track Project along the Antelope Valley Line entirely in Los Angeles County.

The Antelope Valley Line (AVL) is a 76.6-mile-long commuter rail line that serves Northern Los Angeles County as part of the Metrolink system. The AVL extends from Los Angeles Union Station in the City of Los Angeles and terminates in the City of Lancaster with stations in the cities and communities of Los Angeles, Glendale, Burbank, Sun Valley, Sylmar, San Fernando, Newhall, Santa Clarita, Acton, Palmdale, and Lancaster. The AVL corridor is owned entirely by Metro with operating rights to Metrolink up to Palmdale. Metro starts a 40-foot easement between Palmdale and the end of the Metrolink line at Lancaster Station with the remaining right-of-way owned by Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR) starting at Palmdale. The AVL also supports Los Angeles-San Diego - San Luis Obispo Rail Corridor between LAUS and Burbank Junction for 11.4 miles, leaving the remaining 56.2 miles currently operated solely by Metrolink and UPRR.

At the July 2019 meeting, the Board Motion 5.1 (Attachment C) authorized the programming of \$6.6 million in unprogrammed FY18-22 Multi-year Subregional Programming (MSP) Transit Program funds and \$6.15 million in FY23 MSP Transit Program funds from the North County Subregion to enable the intended commuter rail service expansion and construction of four infrastructure improvement projects to a “shovel ready” level.

DISCUSSION

The Antelope Valley Line Service and Capacity Improvement Project will enable improved service frequency and reliability to the commuter rail service to meet the mobility needs of residents, employees, and visitors throughout the region. The AVL corridor is anticipated to experience strong population and employment growth over the next 20 years and solutions to realize the full potential of the AVL will be crucial to support this growth. Around 66% of the AVL corridor is single track, meaning that only one track is provided to operate trains in both directions. This limits the ability to run more frequent services and a regularized schedule, especially during the off-peak and weekends. There are limited maintenance and storage facilities at Lancaster Terminal, and therefore, the operational capacity and flexibility for commuter rail services on the AVL corridor are constrained. There are a total of three (3) capital projects as part of the Antelope Valley Line Service and Capacity Improvement Project that are fully funded.

- 1. Balboa Double Track.** The Balboa Double Track Extension would extend the existing Sylmar siding approximately 6,300 feet north from Balboa Boulevard to Sierra Highway.
- 2. Canyon to Santa Clarita Double Track.** The Canyon Siding Extension would extend the existing Saugus Siding by adding approximately 8,400 feet of new track between Soledad

Canyon Road and Golden Oak Road with optional platform configurations.

- 3. Lancaster Terminal Improvements.** The Lancaster terminal improvements would include expansion of the existing yard with two new 500-foot long and one 1,000-foot long train storage tracks and provisions for fueling with optional platform configurations.

Public Engagement

Metro staff initiated a comprehensive outreach program focused on increasing awareness and education, disseminating information, garnering public input, and supporting the technical and legal environmental processes. To encourage the submittal of comments during the Public Scoping period, legal advertisement notices were published in 11 English, Spanish, Armenian and Chinese language newspapers; 479 notices were mailed to occupants, property and business owners located within 500 feet of each of the infrastructure improvement sites; social media posts published in advance of the virtual scoping meetings; blog publications; email outreach to 4,965 stakeholders; and 10,000 notices delivered door-to-door in the Town of Acton where Metro was notified of difficulty of accessing social media. All public meetings conducted during scoping and as part of the public review of the Draft EIR have been conducted virtually consistent with County of Los Angeles health guidelines and Metro Community Relations policy. Physical copies of the Draft EIR were left at eight public libraries along the entire corridor to allow the public to review a hard copy, if desired from the electronic versions made available through the project webpage. The AVL project was added to the October 18, 2021, North Los Angeles County Transportation Coalition (NCTC) JPA board of directors meeting agenda for consideration. The NCTC JPA approved the board item unanimously on consent. All public comments received have been included with responses in the Final EIR for record in order received.

Environmental Considerations

The staff recommended actions will complete the CEQA environmental clearance for the Antelope Valley Line Service and Capacity Improvement Project is part of the Metrolink's Southern California Optimized Rail Expansion (SCORE) Program Phase 1B and the California State Rail Plan and the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) and Regional Transportation Plan (RTP). The Board must find that notwithstanding the disclosure of these significant and unavoidable impacts, there are specific overriding reasons for approving this Project. These reasons serve to override and outweigh the Project's significant unavoidable impacts. These findings are included in the Project's Statement of Overriding Considerations (Attachment A). In addition, the purpose of the Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Plan (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 in conjunction with Metrolink is responsible for assuring full compliance with the provisions of the MMRP (Attachment B).

Furthermore, section 21080 (b)(10) of the California Public Resources Code declares the Antelope Valley Line Service and Capacity Improvement Project is statutorily exempt since this is a project for the institution or increase of passenger and commuter services on rail already in use, including the modernization of existing stations and parking facilities. Metro has nevertheless elected to prepare this Final EIR in the interest of comprehensively addressing community and stakeholder concerns and to provide a clear record of the potential environmental impacts of the Project.

DETERMINATION OF SAFETY IMPACT

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

Safety is expected to be improved as a result of the Project primarily due to the reduction of 5.9 billion VMT over 39 years (or 154.9 million VMT averaged annually over that time period) as commuters shift from automobile to commuter rail, which experiences far fewer incidents per passenger mile than travel by private vehicle. Recent data shows that during the two years from February 2017 through January 2019, Caltrans Transportation Management Center (TMC) responded to 455 incidents on I-5 between LA and Santa Clarita, and 124 incidents on SR-14 between I-5 and Lancaster. Rail safety is improved by increasing the percentage of the AVL that is double tracked from 34% to 44%, thus reducing the number of train-meets and associated risks.

FINANCIAL IMPACT

With Board approval of the certification of the Final EIR, the CEQA process will be complete. Metro anticipates staff will issue a ROD in January 2022, which will conclude the environmental document and as such, additional budget is not required at this time. Project staff will continue coordinating with the SCRRA to transition the lead role for final design and construction for three infrastructure projects: Balboa Double Track, Canyon Siding Extension and Lancaster Terminal Improvements. Metro financial planning staff will continue cashflow coordination with SCRRA and will return to the Board with a request for funding for design and construction services if required outside of the SCRRA Annual Subsidy.

The Project has capital funding programmed in the Measure M Expenditure Plan for \$6.6 million in unprogrammed FY18-22 Multi-year Subregional Programming (MSP) Transit Program funds and \$6.15 million in FY23 MSP Transit Program funds from the North County Subregion towards environmental and final design activities. The total capital funding cost is \$220.85 million which includes \$113.8 million of Measure M funds, and \$107.05 million of CalSTA 2020 TIRCP state grant funds awarded to the Project. The estimated cost to complete the Project could be higher if additional design options are approved, as the design level increases and pre-construction activities are completed. If the project capital cost exceeds currently identified funding, SCRRA may need to evaluate value engineering, scope reductions, and potential additional funding sources.

EQUITY PLATFORM

The data provided were gathered and assembled during the preparation of technical studies in support of the EIR for the project in 2021. Of a total project catchment population of 3.3 million, over 1 million people (32%) reside in census tracts categorized as SB 535 Disadvantaged Communities (DACs). 58% of the total catchment area population live in census tracts defined as AB 1550 Low-Income Communities. An additional 6% live in areas defined as Low-Income Buffer census tracts. Of the 11 cities and communities of Los Angeles County that this project will provide increased service to, nine are Equity Focus Communities. The project improves mobility and

economic opportunities for the most disadvantaged and low-income communities in North LA County and large populations experiencing environmental burdens and/or living in low-income communities from Sylmar/San Fernando station to LAUS. The AVL project will serve North LA County, which is very ethnically diverse, more so than the Metrolink system as a whole. For example, the AVL has the highest percent of African American riders (19%). Overall, 73% of Metrolink North LA County riders are non-Caucasian, vs. 66% systemwide. It should be noted that the Antelope Valley Line has the lowest percent of riders with annual household income over \$50,000 at 65% as compared to the systemwide average of 80%.

Once completed, the project will increase regional accessibility to employment opportunities along the AVL corridor, and in the jobs-rich downtown area, as well as access to employment opportunities throughout the Metrolink and Metro transit system. All design options were created, added, refined, and now fully integrated into the Final EIR through public engagement. The overall project budget is anticipated to support around 2,900 new full-time jobs. At project completion, ridership (based on average weekday boarding) is expected to increase to 22,800 in 2028 compared to the 7,000 recorded in 2019 for the AVL. The projected increase in ridership reduces congestion and air pollution in adjacent disadvantaged communities associated with high roadway passenger and freight volumes on I-5 and SR-14. The AVL Project will reduce 590,199 metric tons of CO2 equivalent (MTCO2e).

IMPLEMENTATION OF STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS

Recommendation supports strategic plan goals of the Metro Vision 2028 Strategic Plan:

Goal 1: Provide high-quality mobility options that enable people to spend less time traveling. The incremental service and proposed infrastructure projects improve LA County's overall transit network and assets.

Goal 4: Transform LA County through regional collaboration and national leadership. The goal was achieved by partnering with Metrolink, North County Transportation Coalition and the local jurisdictions to implement the Antelope Valley Line Service and Capacity Improvement Project as directed by the Board under motion 5.1.

ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

The board can elect not to certify the Final EIR, approve the project exemptions 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 state grant award workplan, is to be constructed by or before 2028. The current schedule has final design award in 2022 through Metrolink procurement. Delaying the Project would delay these efforts and could increase project capital costs.

NEXT STEPS

Upon Board approval, staff will file the Notice of Determination and/or Notice of Exemption for the

Project with the Los Angeles County Clerk and State of California Clearinghouse. Staff will complete the environmental work for the Antelope Valley Line Service and Capacity Improvement Project and transition all future phases of project development to Metrolink. Metrolink will continue all the design and construction work on the Antelope Valley Line Service and Capacity Improvement Project.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A - Findings of Fact and Statement of Overriding Considerations

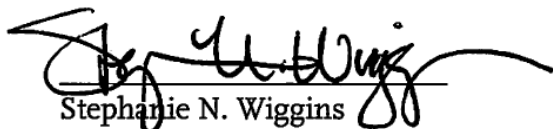
Attachment B - Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Plan

Attachment C - Board Motion 5.1

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