

Gold Line put on to-do list

Rail is finally given place in MTA's long-term plans

By Dan Abendschein
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LOS ANGELES — The Rodney Dangerfield of transportation projects is finally getting a little respect.

After receiving intense pressure from San Gabriel Valley

lawmakers, the county's transportation board on Thursday finally put the Gold Line in its long-term plans.

The move opens up the possibility of federal funding for the project.

The board of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority

produced an unusual unanimous vote to include the project, an unlikely outcome after months of hard negotiations, arguments over regional priorities, and even occasional angry accusations.

County Supervisor Michael Antonovich, an MTA board member, called the outcome a "major victory" for the San Gabriel Valley.

"For the first time MTA is committing to building and maintaining the line," said

Antonovich, who was joined by Supervisor Mark Ridley Thomas and Duarte Councilman John Fasana in pushing for funding for the Gold Line.

For years, area lawmakers have accused the MTA of routing federal money to projects in Los Angeles at the expense of easier-to-build projects in surrounding areas.

Thursday's vote affected the Gold Line two ways.

First, the MTA agreed to provide day-to-day operational

funding for the first phase of the Gold Line extension once it is completed.

Before Thursday, the agency's plan didn't guarantee to operate the line before 2017, even if it is completed by the 2013 goal set by the Foothill Extension Construction Authority.

The second goal might be a little less concrete. The board directed staff to look into getting federal funds for the second phase of the Gold Line extension, from Azusa to Clare-

mont.

But the agency stopped short of promising to request federal "New Starts" money for the project, the most promising way of getting federal cash for local mass transit.

Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Pasadena, who was one of 14 members of Congress who wrote a critical letter to the MTA earlier this week, was not so positive about Thursday's developments.

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"That letter reflected serious skepticism about the MTA's plans and its ability to compete for federal funds, and I don't think that has been resolved," Schiff said.

Besides the "New Starts" program, not a lot of other federal programs pay for projects like the Gold Line, he said.

"If there were other available sources of federal money besides New Starts you'd see the MTA applying for them for the Subway to the Sea," Schiff said.

Still, those most affected by the vote saw it as a step in the right direction.

Habib Balian, the CEO of the Construction Authority, said it will mean the project breaks ground in June and is finished by 2013.

"We got what we need to get this thing going in June," Balian said. "I think we finally

see an intent from the MTA board to make this all work."

And the Gold Line has another chance next year for New Starts money, he said.

Whatever happens with those funds, both MTA officials and the congressional leaders have acknowledged that Los Angeles County is not getting enough in New Starts funding. Officials at the meeting noted that the county has gotten less funding than many smaller metropolitan areas, including Portland, Seattle and Salt Lake City.

Unanimous votes, like the one on Thursday, will show the federal government the county is unified in its transportation goals, board members said.

But there was still no shortage of tension at Thursday's meeting.

Board member and county Supervisor Gloria Molina said she doesn't trust MTA staff to do what they are directed, and

Antonovich accused the Los Angeles members of the board of trying to "derail" the Gold Line's bid for federal funds.

Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, also a board member, had angry words for Antonovich and others trying to amend the long-range plan. He noted that many of them had opposed Measure R, the half-cent sales tax increase that now is providing the funding for the Gold Line's first phase.

"A lot of those who are now trying to actively stop the long-range plan from going through are the same that were against Measure R in the first place," Villaraigosa said.

And Schiff remains extremely skeptical that the MTA will follow through on any of its promises.

"They are very good at finding loopholes in their own policies," Schiff said.

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