

The Long and Winding Route: Analyzing the Influence of Politics on Planning the Wilshire Subway in Los Angeles

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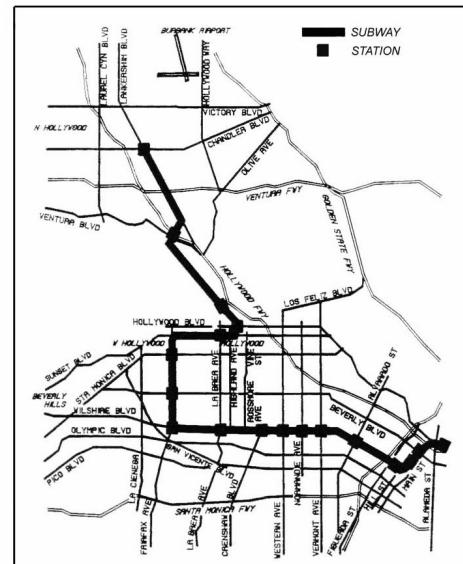
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RESEARCH TOPIC

Los Angeles is known throughout the world as an auto-oriented city, yet for the past three decades the region has invested billions of dollars into an ambitious rail and busway network. Given such a significant investment, many find it perplexing that rail service still only partially traverses Wilshire Boulevard, the region's most densely developed and heavily travelled transit corridor. We examine how conflicting political interests manipulated planning analyses and repeatedly dictated highly technical aspects of the subway's routing and design, ultimately delaying the construction of a rail line along the most promising transit corridor in Los Angeles.



Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles' linear downtown



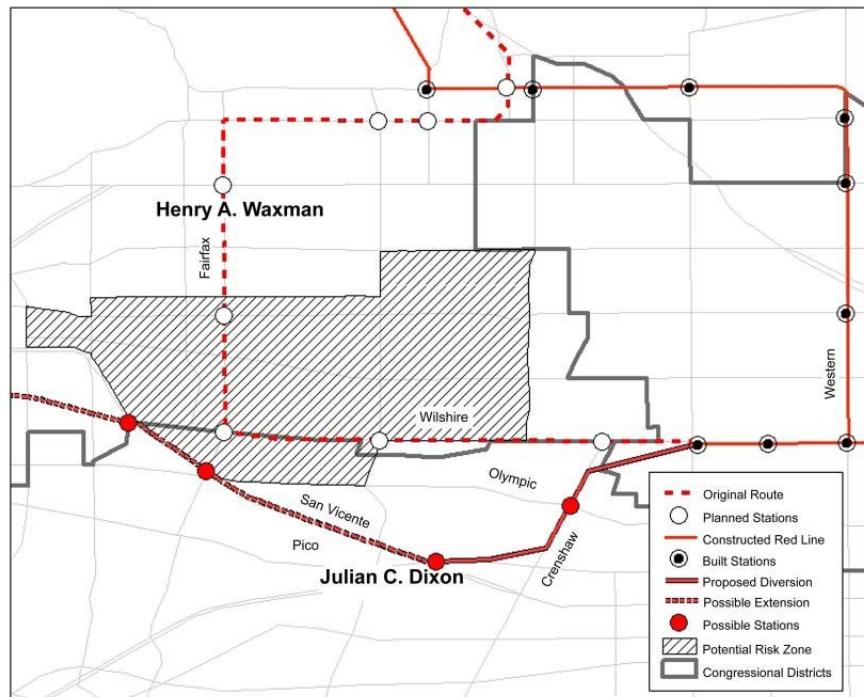
The once-proposed "wounded kneed" corridor

RECOMMENDATION

The protracted Wilshire subway planning process underscores the need for planners and engineers to resist inevitable pressure to bend their analyses to confirm decisions made solely on political grounds. While technical analyses will never dictate what are ultimately political decisions about the routing and design of major transportation facilities, these analyses should *inform* and *temper* such decisions- a professional adherence to unbiased recommendations reduces the risk of poorly conceived projects and restores confidence in the public sector.

STUDY

To analyze the protracted planning of the Wilshire subway from its origins through 2008, we drew information from a variety of sources: published and unpublished documents, correspondence between the various stakeholders and other interested parties, newspaper accounts, extended interviews with nine key players in this controversy, and our own analysis of relevant data. This multi-method approach allowed us to both scrutinize the findings of the various technical analyses as well as examine how these analyses have been used, manipulated, or dismissed by the various interests involved.



Map of the Mid-Wilshire area of Los Angeles, showing current and past subway line proposals, the original methane risk zone, and congressional boundaries.

MAIN FINDINGS

- Our analysis of the Wilshire Subway planning process through 2008 found that the LA MTA consistently tailored its technical analyses to conform to a changing political environment. To satisfy a geographically dispersed array of political constituencies, the MTA initially produced analyses showing the superiority of a Wilshire route. But when a key congressional figure subsequently stood opposed to a Wilshire alignment, the agency produced analysis supporting a southern Mid-City diversion. MTA analysts changed course yet again during the tenure of Mayor Villaraigosa when the political winds again blew down Wilshire Boulevard.
- The most significant instance of political route manipulation occurred in 1986 when Congressman Waxman authored a federal ban on already-approved federal funding for a subway project in his district. Such was the strength of the congressman's political and purse-string power that despite a shared opinion among agency analysts, managers, and governing board members that a Wilshire subway alignment constituted the best alternative, it was abandoned the following year to appease Congressman Waxman.
- Relatively recent events, such as the half-cent sales tax measure passed by LA County voters in 2008, also show the influence of politics on transit planning. Despite the fact that the LA MTA had settled on neither mode nor route of the modestly named "Westside Red Line Extension," then Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's persistent support for the "the subway to the sea" made it widely assumed the mode and route alignment had been determined.
- While their information and analyses can give planners some power in the political process, this Wilshire case study suggests that the selective application of such analyses can just as easily derail evidence-based discourse over transportation systems. There is little evidence that the many ridership forecasts, construction cost estimates, or tunneling safety studies have ever served to inform the views of the key decision makers over the Wilshire Subway; instead most were produced to conform to *a priori* political positions on routing.