

**The rerouting of Metro Rail around Wilshire Boulevard:**

Years of politics, homeowners, and parochialism

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17 December 2014

11.026—Downtown

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The metropolis known as Los Angeles, as of the late 2000s, is home to more than twelve million people. Often, nicknames such as “the freeway city” and “the car capital” are associated with the city and its environs, but even more often it is forgotten that LA was a haven for streetcars in the early twentieth century, with lines traversing from downtown to places such as Pasadena, Long Beach, and Hollywood.<sup>1</sup> A combination of unrestrained regional growth and the automobile’s success among the newer segments of the population—to say nothing of the suburban subdivisions that lent themselves to higher rates of car ownership, such as Palos Verdes—led to the demise of these lines by the 1950s.<sup>2</sup> During the 1950s and 60s, area planners and the regional public transportation authority began drawing up plans for a system of rapid transit lines to reconnect by rail some of those places that were now accessible only by car or public bus; these lines were to be an attempt to follow in the footsteps of other major US and international cities with built-out metro systems. By 1970, it had been decided that Los Angeles’s first subway line would extend westward from downtown below Wilshire Boulevard before turning north to the San Fernando Valley. In particular, Wilshire was chosen as the ideal path due to its relatively high density and bus patronage.<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, the Metro Red and Purple Lines, as the subway route is now named, would come to avoid most of Wilshire Boulevard west of downtown. This peculiar outcome is the result of years of both local and federal debate and opposition, these coming from reasons ranging from changes in the federal administration, to concerns for construction safety, to anti-development movements and even possible racism.

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<sup>1</sup> Ethan N Elkind, *Railtown, the Fight for the Los Angeles Metro Rail and the Future of the City*, University of California Press (2014), page 7.

<sup>2</sup> *Railtown*, pages 6-9.

<sup>3</sup> Janet Clayton, “L.A. Battles for a Share of Transit Funds: Competes With Houston in Bid for U.S. Dollars,” 20 March 1983 (A3), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.

## Origins of Metro Rail

In the earlier years of planning a rapid transit system for Los Angeles, heavily-touted was public transit's ability to raise property values and encourage new investment in previously-decaying, inner-city neighborhoods. While neither of these positive effects could be guaranteed completely, the idea of a “renaissance in downtown Los Angeles” or a “stampede of new high rise construction on relatively undeveloped parcels along the Wilshire corridor” was publicized, backed by recent examples in places such as Toronto, Montréal, and San Francisco.<sup>4</sup> A system spanning across more than a dozen corridors was proposed—roughly following the current freeway system—consisting of both heavy and light rail lines, to be funded in part by a new, countywide sales tax. **(See Figure 1.)** This local financial contribution would be matched four-fold by a recently-created arm of the federal government, the Urban Mass Transportation Administration (UMTA), if it could be proven that the proposed project had widespread support.<sup>5</sup> It was largely by way of UMTA (and its recent successor) that many new rapid transit lines around the country could be built without significant financial hardship on municipal and county governments. The mayor of Los Angeles for much of the 1970s and 80s, Tom Bradley, made it his goal to take advantage of UMTA's deal and build this system of railways.

Chosen by the Southern California Rapid Transit District (SCRTD, or RTD) to be the first line built and proposed for UMTA funding was the Wilshire corridor, which early maps showed as running from downtown to Westwood or Santa Monica.<sup>6</sup> **(See Figure 2.)** “On the Wilshire corridor,” the *Los Angeles Times* reported in early 1980s, “RTD buses currently carry

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<sup>4</sup> Dr Robert A Sigafos, “Subway Could Boost Values,” 3 December 1972, *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.

<sup>5</sup> *Railtown*, pages 29-32.

<sup>6</sup> *Railtown*, pages 24 and 48.

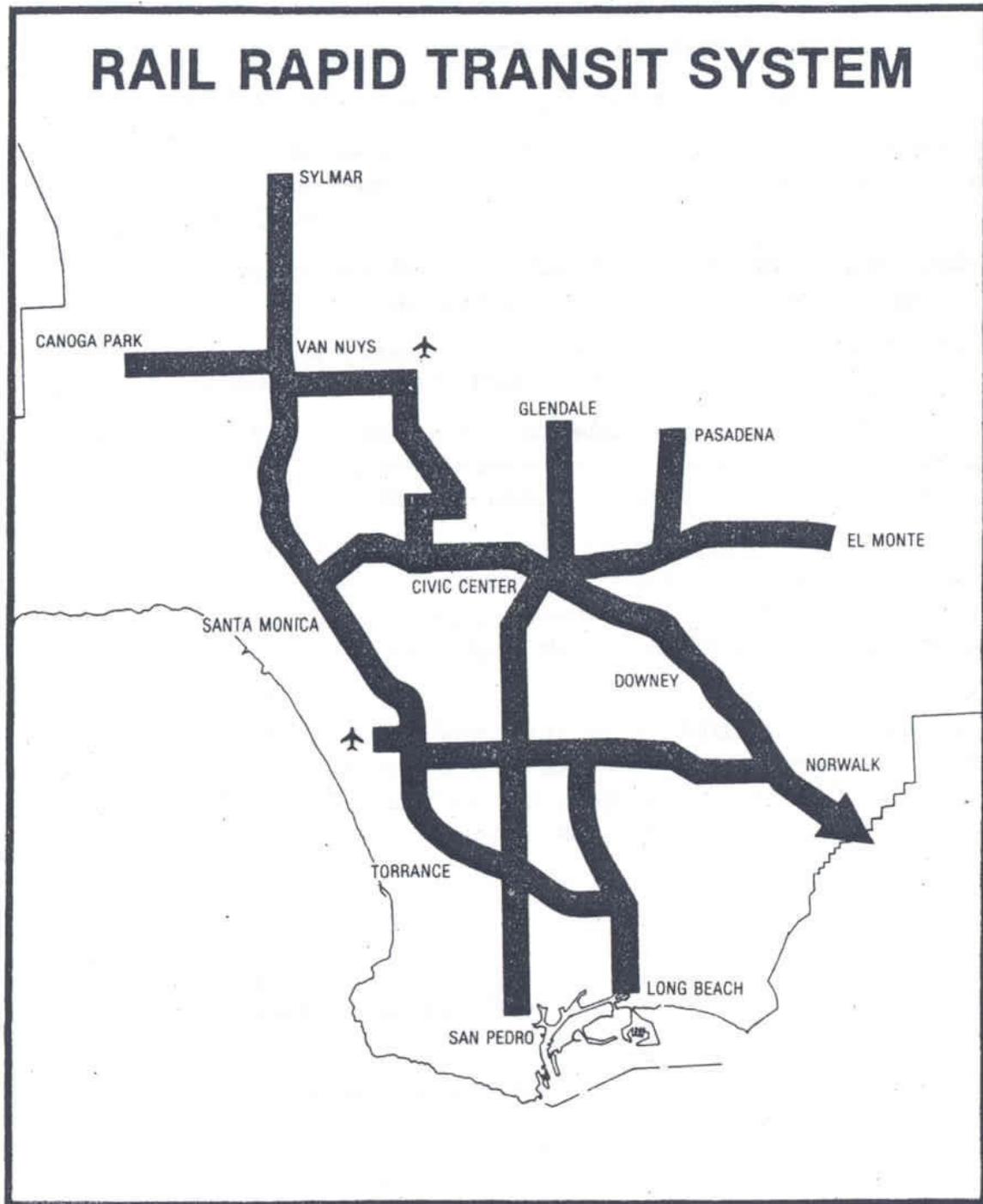


Figure 1. Future rapid transit network, as shown in a 1983 LACTC annual report.

("Past Visions of L.A.'s Transportation Future," Metro, <<http://www.metro.net/about/library/archives/visions-studies/mass-rapid-transit-concept-maps/>>.)

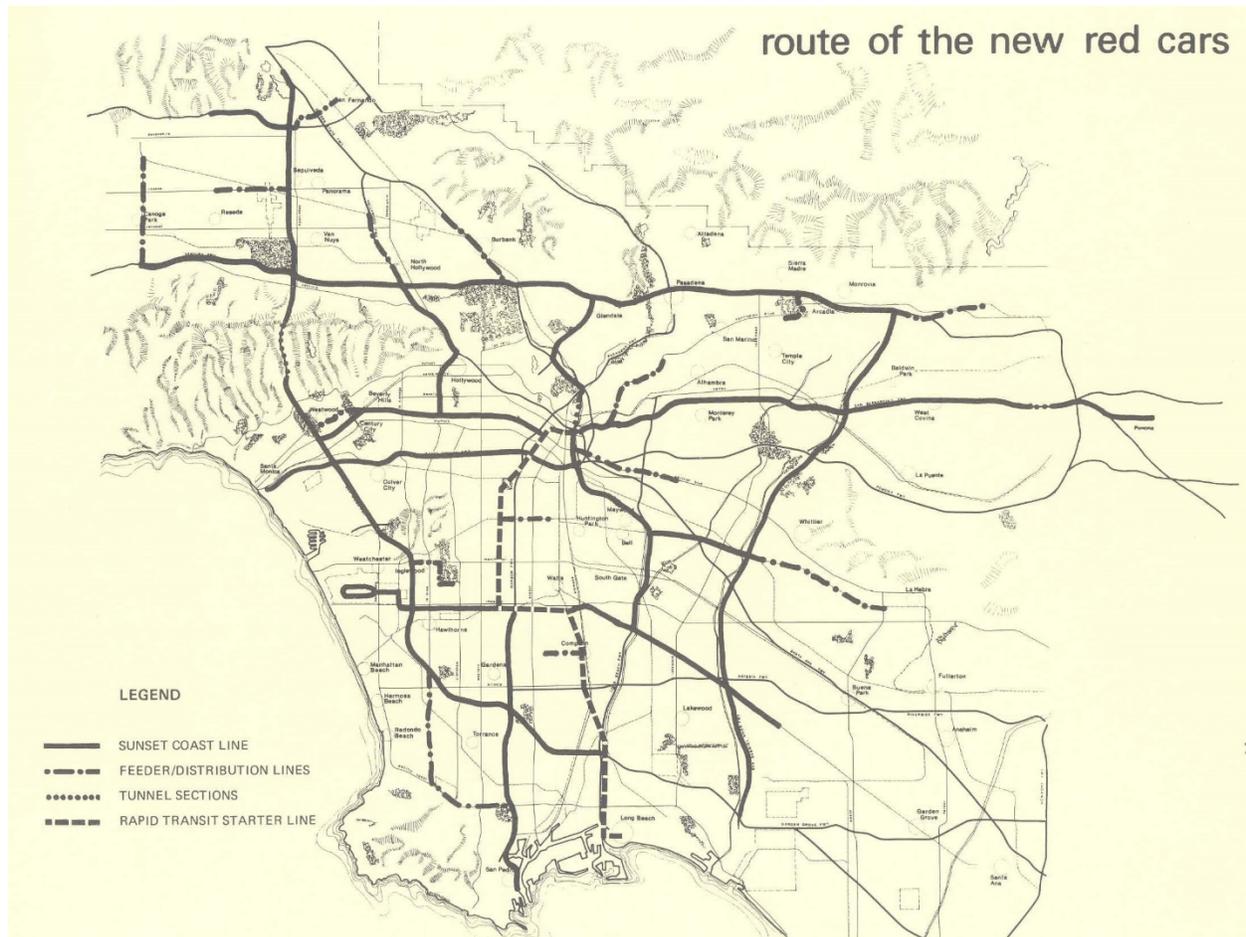


Figure 2. Proposed network of light and heavy rail lines, shown in 1976 as part of a ballot initiative.

(“Past Visions of L.A.’s Transportation Future,” Metro, <<http://www.metro.net/about/library/archives/visions-studies/mass-rapid-transit-concept-maps/>>.)

190,000 passengers per day, more than San Francisco's BART system."<sup>7</sup> This made portions of Wilshire comparable to Manhattan in terms of bus ridership, even at speeds of 6-8 miles per hour.<sup>8</sup> A form of rail transit along the boulevard, the argument went, would drastically raise travel speeds and lower commute times while also taking buses off the streets and stimulating economic growth. And with high transit use already occurring, a replacement subway line would seem to have little chance of becoming a low-patronized failure. When the first outlines of a subway alignment are released by 1979 in an Environmental Impact Statement, however, we see as the "locally-preferred alternative" not a straight track from downtown to the ocean but instead a line that travels halfway down Wilshire, turning northeast to Hollywood via Fairfax Avenue before cutting northwest, underneath the Santa Monica Mountains to the San Fernando Valley.<sup>9</sup> (See **Figure 3.**) This alignment would come to be known as "the Wounded Knee" for both its physical shape and the various political influences and promises—"parochialism," as it was termed—that allegedly led to its creation.<sup>10</sup>

Relatively early in the planning and financing process, public support for a subway line was in the majority—the supporting sales tax having passed by 54 percent of the voting public—but even government representatives warned of future opposition as the planning process turned to the placement of individual stations.<sup>11</sup> "[I]ntense economic activities around stations, if not well planned, can be rejected totally by residents," a former aide for both the mayor and the US

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<sup>7</sup> See Note 3.

<sup>8</sup> Janet Clayton, "Metro Rail Funds Face Further Cuts," 28 July 1983 (C1), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.

<sup>9</sup> Sharon Rosenhause, "Subway Impact on Neighborhoods Draws Little Thought—as Yet," 17 February 1980 (B1), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.

<sup>10</sup> Brian D Taylor et al, "The Thin Red Line, A Case Study of Political Influence on Transportation Planning Practice," *Journal of Planning Education and Research* (29:173-193), June 2009, <<http://jpe.sagepub.com/content/29/2/173.full.pdf+html>>.

<sup>11</sup> *Railtown*, page 47.

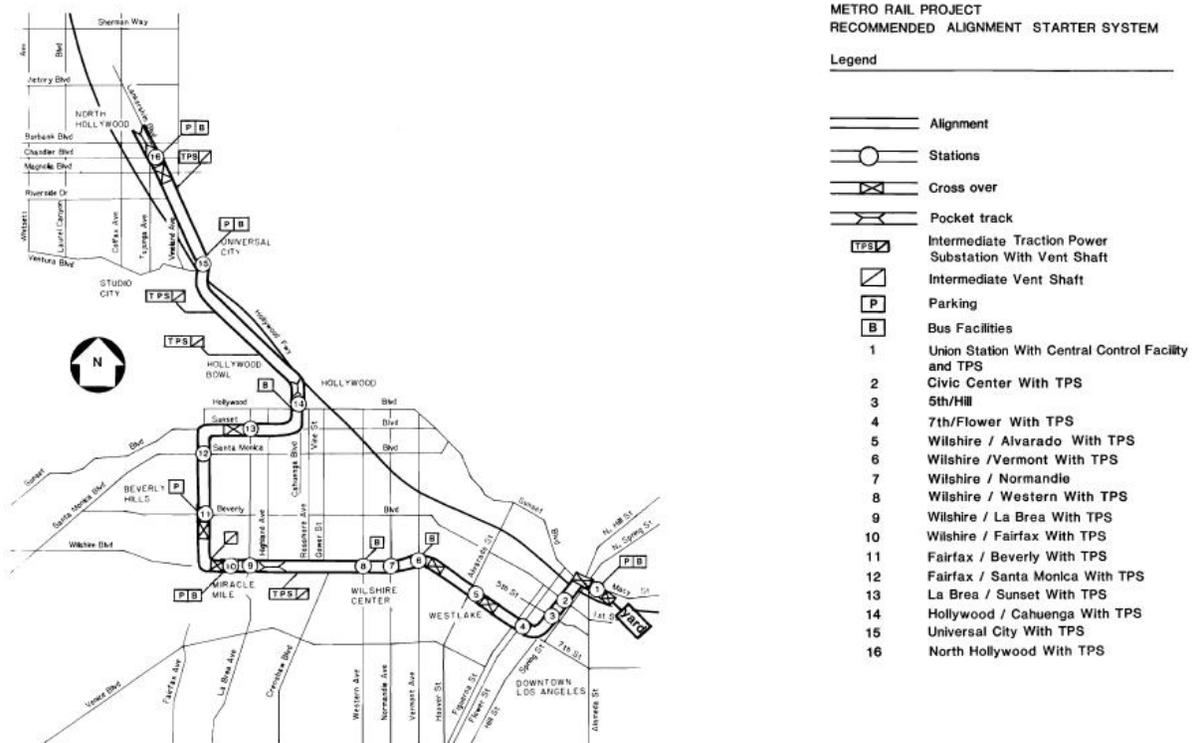


Figure 3. Recommended alignment for Metro Rail subway, 1983.

(“Future Stations Of The Past,” Primary Resources: Metro Dorothy Peyton Gray Transportation Library and Archive, <<http://metroprimaryresources.info/future-stations-of-the-past-1980s-plans-for-wilshire-labrea-subway-overhead-metro-rail/987/>>.)

Secretary of Transportation stated in the *Times*, “[W]e also know that no matter how well planned, some residents may be opposed to any increased intensity in development.”<sup>12</sup> The first major controversy regarding the Wilshire—San Fernando line would involve the possible inclusion of an underground station near the corner of Wilshire and Crenshaw Boulevards.

### Concerning the Crenshaw station

Wilshire Boulevard, in the area where it intersects with Crenshaw Boulevard, acted in the early 1980s as the edge of two distinct neighborhoods. Even on a plan map one could see the Wilshire acting as division between two street grids, the one to the north running perfectly north-south and the other ending at Wilshire with angled corners. (See **Figure 4.**) The residential neighborhood directly south of Wilshire, Southwestern Los Angeles, was populated primarily by middle-to-upper-middle class African-Americans, while predominantly upper-middle-to-upper whites lived in Hancock Park to the north. Through a series of public hearings, it was revealed that many of those on the south side of the boulevard advocated for a subway station at or near Crenshaw on the grounds that, by omitting it, “the black community would be denied immediate access to the city's new rapid transit system.”<sup>13,14</sup> This view was backed by the local African-American newspapers, representatives from the NAACP, as well many area politicians from the Democratic Party.<sup>15</sup> Opposing a station, the residents of Hancock Park and their representing city councilman, John Ferraro, feared that a major transit hub would spur uncontrolled growth, such

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<sup>12</sup> See Note 9.

<sup>13</sup> “Thousands attend public hearings,” *Metro Rail News* (Vol 6, No 2), December 1982, <[http://libraryarchives.metro.net/DPGTL/employeenews/Rail\\_1982\\_Dec.pdf](http://libraryarchives.metro.net/DPGTL/employeenews/Rail_1982_Dec.pdf)>.

<sup>14</sup> Janet Clayton, “Planner Supports Crenshaw Boulevard Stop for Subway,” 1 April 1983 (C1), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.

<sup>15</sup> See Note 14.

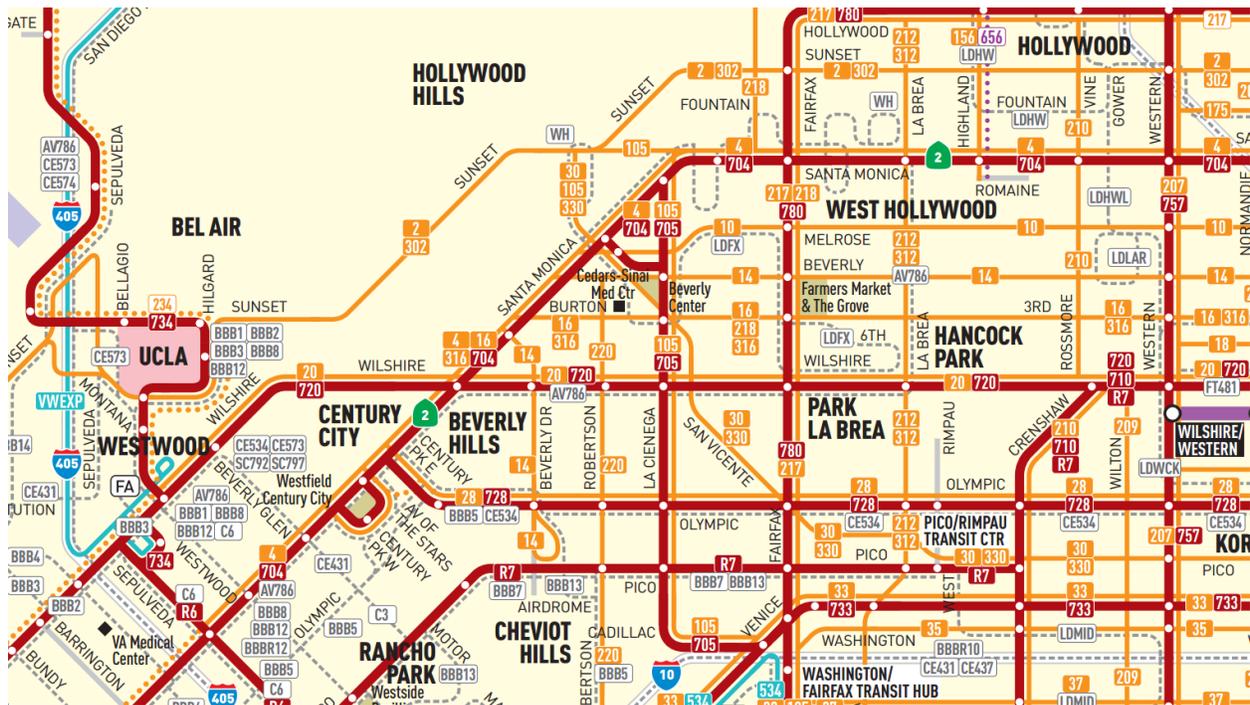


Figure 4. Map of western Los Angeles, including the Mid-Wilshire district and Westwood. Colored lines represent current Metro bus routes. Note Crenshaw Boulevard toward the lower-right hand corner, and the purple Wilshire/Western station on the right representing the extent of the Wilshire stub-track built in anticipation of future tunneling.

(“Maps & Timetables,” Metro, <[http://media.metro.net/riding\\_metro/maps/images/system\\_map.pdf](http://media.metro.net/riding_metro/maps/images/system_map.pdf)>.)

as the construction of high-rises, in the neighborhood and thus reduce the quality of life. These advocates had on their side the Park Mile Plan. The Park Mile Plan was a set of development and land-use controls and restrictions for this stretch of Wilshire; it specifically prohibited “high-density development” and enacted a two-story height limit for new buildings in the zone.<sup>16,17</sup> For the residents of Hancock Park, this was the primary justification for a lawsuit filed against RTD with the intention of securing an injunction against a Crenshaw station. The lawsuit, demonstrating local resistance to the subway plan, had the potential to prevent UMTA from approving federal funds, a very real threat after the entrance of President Reagan's anti-spending administration in 1981.<sup>18</sup> One city councilman, an African-American, suggested that the opposition from Hancock Park was underlain with racial grievances: “I don't think they want ethnic people standing on that corner of Crenshaw and Wilshire. If not that, why don't they want the stop there? It's not prohibited by the [Park Mile Plan].”<sup>19</sup>

SCRTD, likely wanting to maintain a positive public image in fear of opposition for the entire subway line, said that it would refrain from making the deciding on a Crenshaw station, promising that it would approve whatever recommendation the Los Angeles City Council would agree on.<sup>20</sup> It originally did not have Crenshaw on the original list of proposed stops due to the city wanting only to pay for stations in areas with the potential for major development (hampered by the Park Mile Plan), but by 1982 was reconsidering the decision due to both outcry and

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<sup>16</sup> Janet Clayton, “Crenshaw Station Issue Could Stall Subway Plan,” 22 November 1982 (C1), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.

<sup>17</sup> *Railtown*, page 84.

<sup>18</sup> Victor Merina, “Subway Plan Becomes a Symbol of L.A.’s Transit Needs, 16 May 1981 (C1), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.

<sup>19</sup> See Note 16.

<sup>20</sup> See Note 16.

projected ridership figures which showed that it would receive a sizable patronage (higher than what would have been the next-nearest station a mile away).<sup>21,22</sup> The patronage would largely be a result of passengers transferring to the subway from Crenshaw Boulevard bus services.

Ultimately, the City Council voted in favor of a Crenshaw station, and it was subsequently approved by the RTD Board of Directors in March 1984. The station would be designed in such a way as to incorporate the residential atmosphere and would contain only one entrance. RTD news bulletins, distributed on-board buses, praised the decision, quoting General Manager John Dyer as saying that the plan conforms to the Mile Park Plan and would “lead to an overall enhancement of property values and environmental quality” in the surrounding neighborhood.<sup>23</sup>

While this represented the end of the debate as to whether a station should be erected at Crenshaw, it did not mean that area residents were to let construction begin without further action. Early in 1985, Councilman Ferraro along with Representative Henry Waxman—the Congressman serving much of the area just to the north of Wilshire along the Metro Rail (as it was by then known) project area—and a group of homeowners put on the public ballot a city

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<sup>21</sup> Bill Boyarsky, “Crenshaw-Wilshire Subway Stop Backed,” 11 August 1982 (C1), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.

<sup>22</sup> Ironically, it should be noted, RTD approved in the summer of 1983 a new station to serve the Hollywood Bowl, an outdoor concert venue in an otherwise unpopulated area of the Hollywood Hills; RTD faced criticism for giving in to special interests to build in an area “with no potential for the type of private development that could offset the cost of building the station.” The station was also projected to experience only modest ridership. When, more than five years later, federal funds were finally appropriated for this stretch of the subway, it was found that the station did not meet Federal Transit Administration (FTA) guidelines for funding, and station was dropped.

(Michael W Lewis, “The RTD Is Out of Bounds on Hollywood Bowl Stop,” 9 August 1983 (C5), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.)

<sup>23</sup> “State Approves Metro Rail Construction Funding,” *Metro News Bulletin* (Vol 2, No 2), May 1984, RTD, <[http://libraryarchives.metro.net/DPGTL/employeenews/Bulletin\\_1984\\_May.pdf](http://libraryarchives.metro.net/DPGTL/employeenews/Bulletin_1984_May.pdf)>.

charter amendment banning Los Angeles from levying special property assessments on residential properties near the subway route.<sup>24</sup> No opposition to the ban was organized, and thus the measure passed with ease. By this point, the actual route of the subway had been finalized and the Reagan had awarded a small amount of funds to allow RTD to finalize the engineering plans and potentially break ground. UMTA had approved, in 1984, long-term financing for the first five miles of tunnels west from Union Station in downtown—forgoing approval for the entire route due to lack of funds.<sup>25</sup> The need for further approval hurled the remainder of the project back into jeopardy, leading to the perfect circumstances for a series of actions that began in March 1985.

### **A figurative and literal explosion**

On the afternoon of 24 March 1985, shoppers inside a Ross discount store on Fairfax Avenue saw the sky fall. “It looked like it was raining fire,” explained one witness, “Gusting air, screams, ashes, black objects flying around. It was horrible.”<sup>26</sup> What had occurred was an ignition and subsequent explosion of methane gas that had leaked into the store from underground. Before the Ross and its surrounding buildings were erected, the area served as an oil field—over time, the field was abandoned, and pockets of gas remained underneath with fumes gradually rising to the surface (unless they were blocked by buildings or other impervious

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<sup>24</sup> Victor Merina, “Bid to Cap Campaign Donations Stirs Passions Charter Measure Is Hottest of 7 on City's Ballot,” 11 Feb 1985, *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.

<sup>25</sup> *Railtown*, pages 89-91.

<sup>26</sup> Marita Hernandez “‘It was Like a Cyclone,’ Woman Says of Hellish Scene in Midst of Blast,” 27 March 1985 (A26), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.

surfaces).<sup>27</sup> While the incident was not related to Metro Rail work, it did put much of the project under scrutiny, as the route was to traverse only yards away from the explosion site along Fairfax. This scrutiny was led by Representative Waxman, who had just pushed for the City to enact homeowner protections for those living near the proposed subway. Widely regarded as having the greatest fundraising power of all House Representatives (having portions Hollywood in his district surely aided this), Waxman would come to serve 20 terms on Capitol Hill upon his now-imminent retirement.<sup>28,29</sup> Early during the project's planning stages, Waxman publically declared his support for the subway line but expressed doubts about its passing federal muster in the face of the new Reagan administration.<sup>30</sup> Two years before the Fairfax explosion, he even authored a letter to the *Los Angeles Times* asserting united support for the project but criticizing “individual pet projects” for delaying construction on an expandable base subway line—signed by thirteen other local Congressmen from both the right and the left.<sup>31</sup> Sure enough, he would stick to his latter point in the aftermath of the explosion.

By mid-June, several weeks following the release of the City of Los Angeles's task force report on the explosion, Waxman held a hearing on construction safety for Metro Rail during

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<sup>27</sup> “Task Force Report on the March 24, 1985 Methane Gas Explosion and Fire in the Fairfax Area, City of Los Angeles,” City of Los Angeles, 27 June 1985, <[http://libraryarchives.metro.net/DPGTL/losangelescity/1985\\_methane\\_gas\\_explosion\\_task\\_force\\_report\\_fair\\_fai.pdf](http://libraryarchives.metro.net/DPGTL/losangelescity/1985_methane_gas_explosion_task_force_report_fair_fai.pdf)>.

<sup>28</sup> Josh Getlin, “What Makes Henry Tick?,” 25 April 1990 (1), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.

<sup>29</sup> David A Graham, “Henry Waxman’s Retirement: A Bad Sign for House Democrats in 2014,” 30 January 2014, *The Atlantic*, <<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/01/henry-waxmans-retirement-a-bad-sign-for-house-democrats-in-2014/283476/>>.

<sup>30</sup> See Note 18.

<sup>31</sup> Henry A Waxman, “Metro Rail for Los Angeles,” 28 July 1983 (C6), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.

which he saw “raised ‘some very serious questions’ about the safety of the project.”<sup>32</sup> Senior members of the Beverly Wilshire Homeowners Association—representing local residents north of Wilshire—also expressed concern about rail construction increasing the possibility of future explosions. This was despite assurances by RTD board members that areas of tunneling through gas had already been identified and that precautionary steps would be taken to avoid, detect, and mitigate build-ups of gas as required by state laws.<sup>33</sup> Coming only several months before Congress was to take up a major transportation bill, set to include appropriations for the first legs of the subway, Waxman halted any prospect of building by amending the bill to prevent federal funds from being set aside until the safety of the subway had been thoroughly reexamined.<sup>34</sup> Unsuccessfully, SCRTD attempted to avert such action by promising both internal as well as external reviews of tunneling safety, complaining that rerouting the subway line would require the writing and approval of new environmental studies—which would consume more years and put back into jeopardy the entire project.<sup>35</sup> Waxman, his colleague Congressman Julian Dixon (representing the area just south of Wilshire), and RTD would come to make a small compromise, however: to permit and fund the initial leg of construction through downtown if planners conceded to design new routes to go around the methane-identified areas underneath Wilshire.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Mathis Chazanov, “Methane Gas Pockets May Kill Metro Rail—Waxman,” 15 June 1985 (A1), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Bob Sexter and Kevin Roderick, “Waxman Hurls New Roadblock at Metro Rail,” 8 Aug 1986, *The Los Angeles Times*, <[http://articles.latimes.com/1986-08-08/news/mn-1798\\_1\\_waxman](http://articles.latimes.com/1986-08-08/news/mn-1798_1_waxman)>.

<sup>35</sup> Rich Connell, “Metro Rail Shift Might Peril Funds,” 29 Aug 1985 (C1), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.

<sup>36</sup> *Railtown*, pages 92-94.

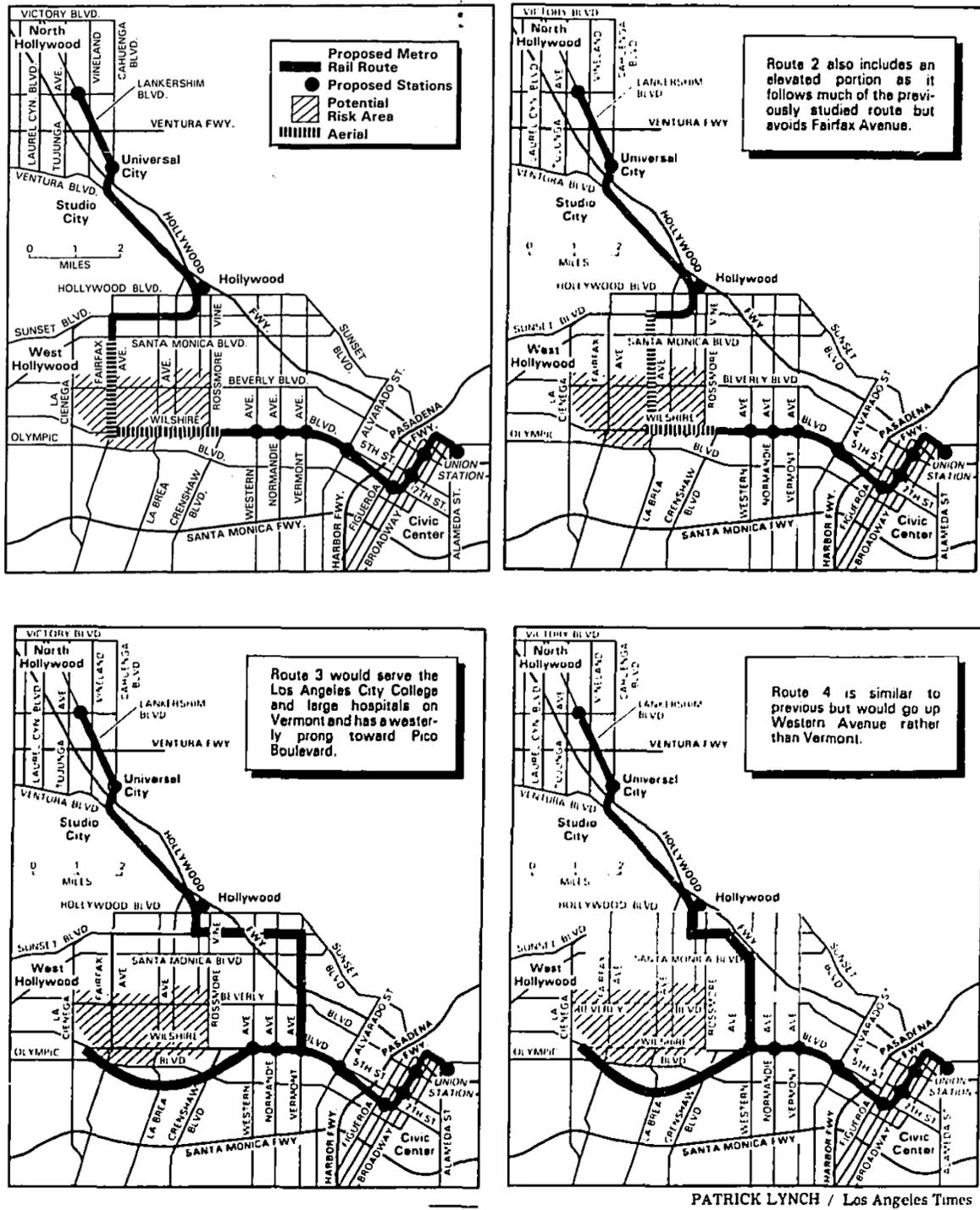
## Rerouting the subway

In 1986, ground broke on the first leg of Metro Rail, even while the routing of the subway line remained uncertain. Six new alternatives were identified, two of them avoiding the prohibited area to the east and north—through downtown Hollywood—two others splitting the subway into two branches, one moving through Hollywood and the other running just south of the no-build line near Wilshire, and finally two alternatives maintaining the same route as previous but on elevated tracks above Wilshire instead of under the boulevard.<sup>37</sup> (See **Figure 5 for map of alternatives.**) RTD, aiming to maintain as high a projected ridership as possible (assumedly to maximize revenues), selected the latter as its newly preferred route. As might be predicted from the previous several years, many area residents were not fond of the idea of rapid transit cars rolling above Wilshire. A group claiming to represent 5000 homeowners, No El on Wilshire Coalition (NEOW), was formed. Its coordinator, Bill Christopher, contended that “[n]oise and aesthetics are our primary concerns. The structure [...] would be a very heavy concrete structure . . . . It would overpower the Wilshire streetscape.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, they believed an elevated railway would create blight and, as a result, lower property values—very similar to the arguments made to remove the elevated tracks of last century elsewhere in the US. These arguments are more similar to those made against the Crenshaw station than those made following the Fairfax explosion, focusing on aesthetics and sound pollution rather than safety. Nevertheless, Christopher promised a fierce battle against an elevated track, threatening to “work with Congressman Waxman’s office to make sure federal funding will include

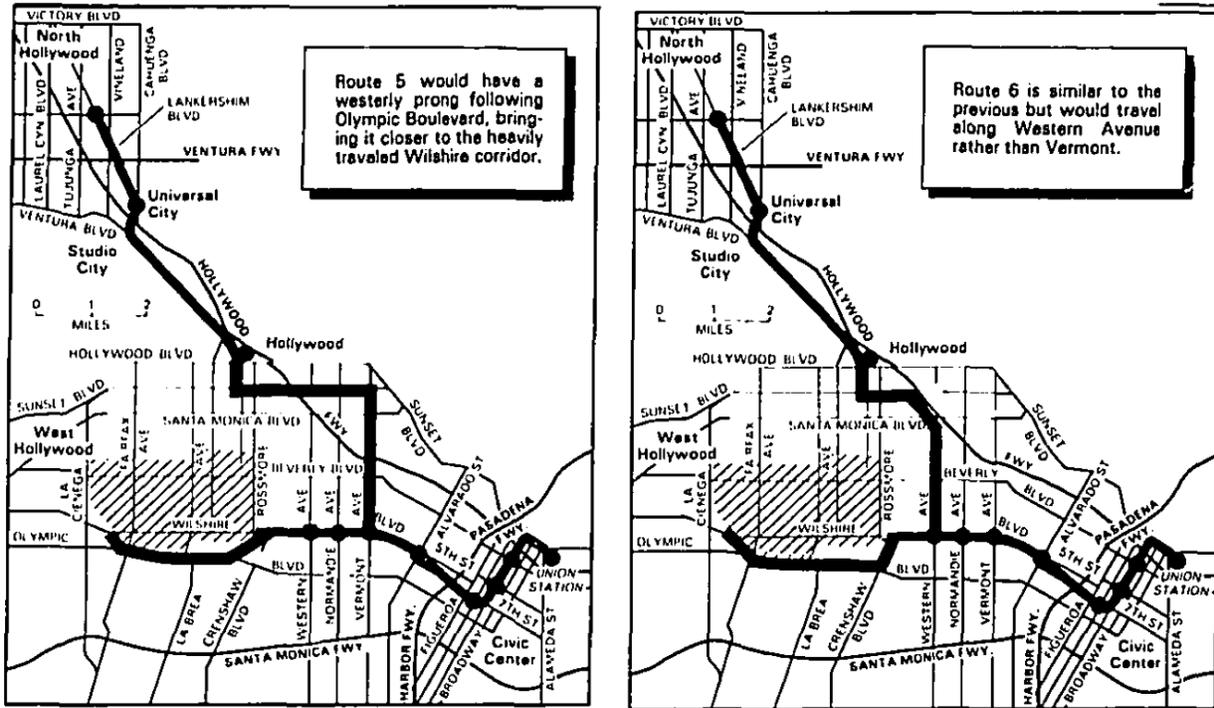
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<sup>37</sup> Rich Connell, “RTD Unveils New Metro Plans,” 9 Jan 1985 (B1), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.

<sup>38</sup> Rich Connell, “Merchants Oppose Elevated Tracks: Favored Metro Rail Path Is Most Attacked,” 21 May 1986 (SD29), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.



Figures 5a-5d. See next page for continuation.



Figures 5e-5f. The six maps show RTD’s proposed alternatives as of early 1986, after the Waxman-sponsored ban on the use of federal funds to tunnel under the “Potential Risk Area” identified in Mid-Wilshire.

(Rich Connell, “RTD Proposes 6 Possible Routes for L.A. Metro Rail,” 9 January 1986 (B8), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.)

restrictions’ against elevated trains.’”<sup>39</sup> Perhaps ironically, NEOW favored an alternative to split Metro into two branches, one splitting north to Hollywood via Vermont Avenue, and the other running underneath Wilshire—though this could never be built under the 1985 federal prohibition. By mid-1987, the RTD board of directors conceded to mounting pressure and decided to remove from consideration any rail line along Wilshire Boulevard.<sup>40</sup> Giving up the idea of running trains along the core of Mid-Wilshire and the Fairfax area, the RTD director at the time, Nikolas Patsaouras said: ““Maybe these people don’t want [a rapid transit line running by them], and maybe they don’t deserve it [...] Why not study a route that people want?””<sup>41</sup>

Over the next year, RTD would come back to recommend a route that turns north from Wilshire onto Vermont Avenue and then westward on Sunset Boulevard, the latter portion being run on elevated rails. After hearing concerns from television and radio studios about interference between their work and the possible vibrations coming from frequent trains—regardless of whether they were from above or below the ground—RTD agreed to route the Hollywood stretch of the line underground via Hollywood Boulevard instead of Sunset.<sup>42,43</sup> As for further construction westward on Wilshire, the plan called for a small stub branch to extend from Vermont Avenue, stopping at Western Avenue, just short of Waxman’s tunnel ban zone. The stub was to be built in (perhaps defiant) hopes of future tunneling take place further underneath the boulevard. This final routing, as approved in 1988, is replicated as **Figure 6**. Thus the

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<sup>39</sup> David Haldane, “Wilshire Vows Fight on Elevated Metro Rail Lines,” 15 Mar 1987 (B3), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.

<sup>40</sup> Scott Harris, “Metro Rail Drops Wilshire Route; Plans Alternatives,” 1 May 1987 (D1), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Rich Connell, “New RTD Plan Would Steer Metro Rail Clear of Studios on Sunset,” 8 Jan 1988 (D3), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.

<sup>43</sup> *Railtown*, pages 96-98.

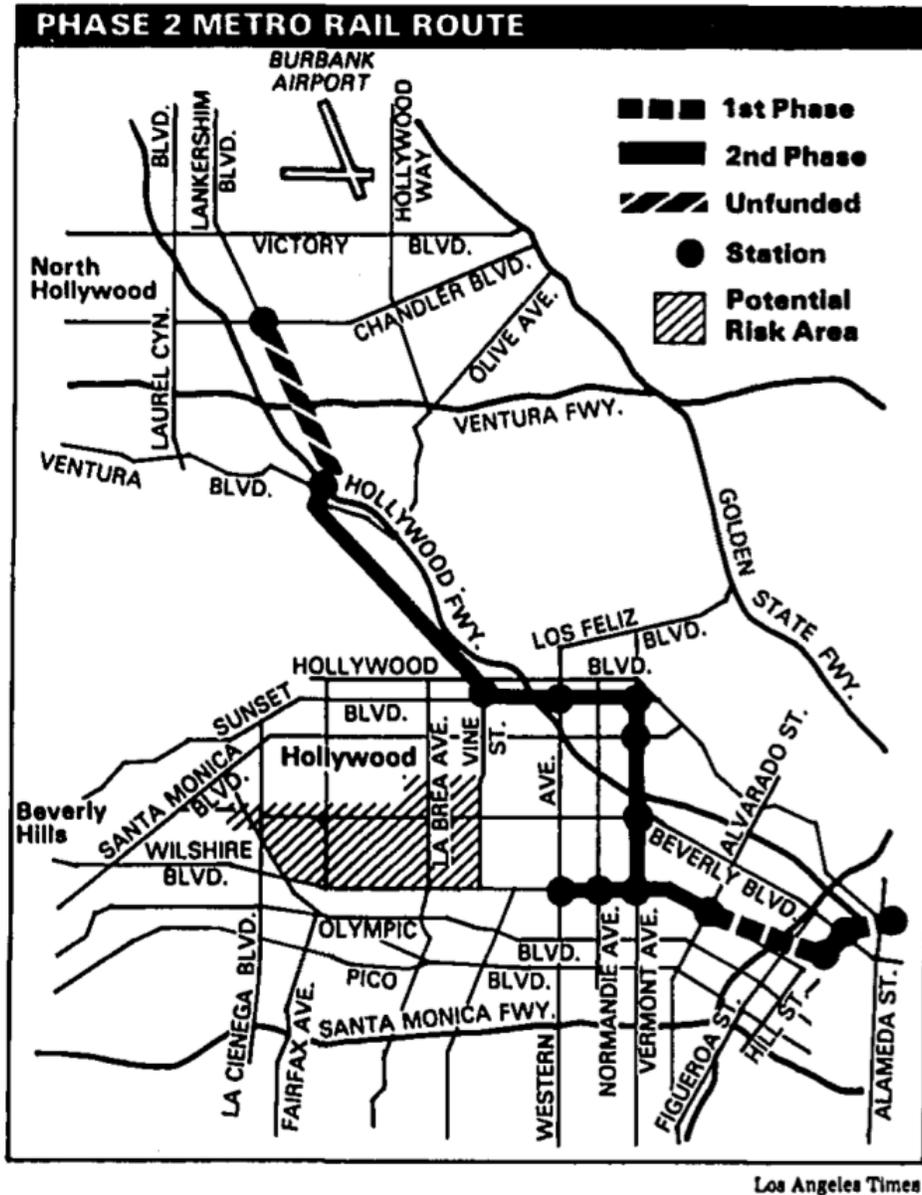


Figure 6. Map showing final RTD for what would become the Metro Rail Red Line, with a main branch between Union Station (right-hand end) and North Hollywood, and a stub branch between Union Station and Wilshire/Western.

(Scott Harris, "RTD Approves Plans to Extend Metro Rail Subway Into Valley," 15 July 1988 (AA3), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.)

controversy of building a subway would seem to have come to a close—RTD, or the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA), as it would become in the 1990s, would come to build the subway according to this final routing and operate it to all stations by the end of year 2000.<sup>44</sup> Talks of continuing subway tunneling under Wilshire would resurrect in the mid-2000s—this is discussed in the later Afterward—but from 1999 through the present day, a mile-long stub would exist on Wilshire between Vermont and Western Avenues.

### **Examining Henry Waxman**

As to the question of why the Metro Rail route was diverted away from most of the Mid-Wilshire district, the fingers could be pointed in several directions. The most prominent figure with significant outside power over the fate of the transit project was Representative Henry Waxman, whose district included many of the more affluent portions of Los Angeles County. Becoming a prominent Democrat in Congress—both in his influence and fundraising skills—and serving for what will end up being a total of forty years, Waxman is often known by his opponents as a career politician.<sup>45</sup> His early comments concerning the rail project, seriously questioning the likelihood of obtaining federal funding for tunneling, could suggest that his public support was only lukewarm—perhaps his support in Congress depended on other political circumstances at the time of a vote.<sup>46</sup> Indeed, we cannot find evidence of Waxman’s direct involvement with the subway project until Mid-Wilshire residents and businesses appealed to him in early 1985 to enact tax protections for property owners along the proposed route. Before

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<sup>44</sup> Todd S Purdum, “Los Angeles Subway Reaches End of the Line,” 23 Jun 2000, *The New York Times*, <<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/06/23/us/los-angeles-subway-reaches-end-of-the-line.html>>.

<sup>45</sup> See Note 28.

<sup>46</sup> See Note 29.

this, his role was primarily that of an observer, providing support without making the issue his priority. In between 1980 and 1985, Waxman acted in Washington as the primary sponsor for several significant health and pharmaceutical bills, including the Infant Formula Act of 1980, the Orphan Drug Act of 1983, and the Drug Price Competition and Patent Term Restoration Act of 1984.<sup>47,48,49</sup> This can easily be read as the record of a Congressman who concerns himself with affairs of the nation as a whole with as much or even more interest than local on-goings.

Waxman's involvement in the subway project following the Fairfax is two-faced: it demonstrated his care and concern for constituents by demanding that Metro Rail be built safely around former oil fields, which in turn served to boost his image nationwide as a champion for health and environmental issues. Between 1979 and 1995, Waxman served as the chair of the Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Health and the Environment.<sup>50</sup> It is in this capacity by which Waxman led the hearing in Los Angeles on tunneling safety following the Fairfax explosion. Portraying his opposition to rail as primarily a matter of public health and safety kept Waxman politically correct both locally as well as in DC. This did not mean that Waxman had no other concerns in the back of his mind, however. Several months after the explosion had passed, he "acknowledged that he has concerns about the cost-effectiveness of the [entire subway...and] suggested that by raising questions about safety, he is providing an opportunity for

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<sup>47</sup> "H.R. 6940 (96<sup>th</sup>): Infant Formula Act of 1980," GovTrack.US, <<https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/96/hr6940>>.

<sup>48</sup> "Orphan Drugs," Representative Henry A. Waxman, 33<sup>rd</sup> Congressional District of California, <<http://waxman.house.gov/orphan-drugs>>.

<sup>49</sup> Wendy H Schacht and John R Thomas, "Patent Law and Its Application to the Pharmaceutical Industry: An Examination of the Drug Price Competition and Patent Term Restoration Act of 1984 ('The Hatch-Waxman Act')," Congressional Research Service (The Library of Congress), 18 December 2000, <<http://www.law.umaryland.edu/marshall/crsreports/crsdocuments/RL30756.pdf>>.

<sup>50</sup> "Ranking Member Henry Waxman," Committee on Energy and Commerce, <<http://democrats.energycommerce.house.gov/index.php?q=page/ranking-member-henry-waxman>>.

a reevaluation of the entire project.”<sup>51</sup> This may also have given him incentive to continue to pursue action against RTD despite hearing from experts that tunneling under Wilshire would be safe. In later years, the Congressman would admit to holding reservations against the line based on the effects that it might have had on a predominantly-Jewish neighborhood along Fairfax Avenue—an area with which he had personal ties.<sup>52</sup> Despite this, he let only those issues and factors which aligned with his focus on Capitol Hill make the public record—Waxman successfully kept more personal opinions on Metro Rail from being tied to his name as the events unfolded. During those times when Waxman did publically question other aspects of the project, he maintained that it was construction safety that acted as the segue to these other sources of opposition.

Perhaps it might be insightful to speculate what may and may not have occurred had Waxman not stepped in when he did. Without the actions of Representative Waxman, an effective ban on tunneling under Wilshire would not have taken effect. This would not necessarily have allowed the subway to be built without delay, however, as area constituents could have filed a lawsuit to block construction—the residents of Hancock Park had demonstrated this power during the Crenshaw station controversy. Federal funding for the project—recalling that, without it, no construction would ever take place—may also not necessarily be guaranteed: other lawmakers may well look at an ongoing suit as signaling mixed support for rail and perhaps not worthy of funds. The lack of action (and threat of action) by Waxman would certainly have increased the possibility of a Wilshire subway becoming a reality, but at the same time not have guaranteed construction.

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<sup>51</sup> Rich Connell, “Metro Rail Supporters Try to Heal Latest Rift,” 28 Aug 1985 (B1), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.

<sup>52</sup> *Railtown*, page 86.

## The neighborhood gang

Another possible factor leading to Metro Rail's rerouting was the ability for homeowners near and along Wilshire, especially those in Hancock Park, to band together in protest of the plans. We differentiate here the home-owning residents from area business owners, who had mixed opinions on the prospect of a subway line. In fact, the Wilshire Area Chamber of Commerce in 1986 endorsed the idea of having rapid transit elevated over the boulevard, foreseeing the economic benefit of having passengers come right to members' doorsteps.<sup>53</sup> As mentioned in previous sections, it is likely that Representative Waxman took actions regarding Metro Rail only in response to constituent appeal. Today, those residents opposed to the subway or particular elements of it would be labeled as NIMBYs—a category of persons typically against construction in their proximity, standing for “Not in My Backyard.” NIMBYs have had their share of influencing transportation projects in the US over the past half-century, such as with Boston's great highway revolt of the 1960s, preventing a tangle of new expressways from crisscrossing many built-up portions of Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts.<sup>54</sup> In just the decade previous to the rail controversies of Los Angeles, Washington, DC-area residents voiced concerns about its proposed suburban rapid transit system, especially in the neighborhood of Georgetown, which is considered by many now as a conspicuous hole in the rail network.<sup>55</sup> Thus, the residents opposed to the Wilshire Boulevard tunneling had past examples to look to, and they of course had existing density and height limit laws (the Mile Park Plan) to turn to as

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<sup>53</sup> See Note 38.

<sup>54</sup> Anthony Flint, “Boston's Highway That Went Nowhere: Lessons from the Inner Belt Fight, 40 Years Later,” CityLab, 1 May 2012, <<http://www.citylab.com/commute/2012/05/bostons-highway-went-nowhere-look-back-inner-belt-fight-40-years-later/1884/>>.

<sup>55</sup> David Alpert, “Georgetown never blocked Metro stop,” Greater Greater Washington, 20 June 2007, <<http://greatergreaterwashington.org/post/423/georgetown-never-blocked-metro-stop/>>.

reasons to not invest in the neighborhood. These residents were also likely to be well-equipped financially to fight against construction on Wilshire, by litigation or other means—the people of the Hancock Park earn the highest median income between downtown and Beverly Hills.<sup>56</sup>

### **NIMBYs: Racism and parochialism**

Naturally, we must ask what factored into the residents' opposition. During the Crenshaw controversy, the most common worry was that of increased development negatively affecting quality of life. This was despite the assurance of some planners and politicians that the Park Mile Plan would not be violated simply by building the station—many did not trust that the city would stand behind the zoning regulations if coaxed by developers. Even the *Times*, however, hinted that other beliefs could have been fueling some of the opposition. One representing state senator “said he believed part of the homeowners’ concerns were ‘that they don’t want working people stopping there,’” according to the newspaper, and replied “‘I think so’” when asked if he was referring to the black population.<sup>57</sup> In just one slice of the debate, Councilman Ferraro publically supported a plan where Crenshaw Boulevard buses would turn at Wilshire and proceed to subway stations at either Western Avenue or La Brea Avenue, arguing that a Crenshaw Station would result in more buses terminating at the intersection, increasing traffic on residential side streets.<sup>58</sup> While his reasoning made sense for the immediate area, it also meant that buses would simply create traffic at the adjacent stations—kicking the can down the street, so to speak. Under

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<sup>56</sup> “Median Income,” *The Los Angeles Times*,  
<<http://maps.latimes.com/neighborhoods/income/median/neighborhood/list/#hancock-park>>.

<sup>57</sup> Janet Clayton, “Major Decisions Anticipated on Metrorail Subway Route, Stops,” 26 Jul 1982 (B3), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.

<sup>58</sup> Bill Boyarsky, “A Subway for the City: Elected Leaders Must Get Aboard Now for a Trip to Tomorrow,” 15 Aug 1982 (D2), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.

Ferraro's scheme, since passengers would no longer transfer between Crenshaw buses and Wilshire buses at the junction of the two major streets, the area immediately around the intersection would actually see a *decrease* in foot traffic after Metro Rail's completion.

A 1982 *Times* editorial compares the controversy surrounding a Crenshaw station to decisions made in 1950s and 1960s by Los Angeles's public school system with regards to creating school attendance boundaries, and how it, in the writer's view, "legitimized existing neighborhood [race-based] segregation."<sup>59</sup> The decisions at the time were said to have been made on the basis of cost-efficiency, rather than less quantifiable socioeconomic effects. The initial decision by SCRTD to pass on a Crenshaw station was for much the same reason, without consideration of what the decision may say about the operator's views on social equity or preserving neighborhood heritages. As might be expected, Wilshire-area resident leaders sternly denied any racial motives behind their opposition.<sup>60</sup>

Following the 1985 explosion, we also observe that the general view of residents is no longer opposition to a particular node on the proposed line, but rather opposition to the entire project on the basis of safety and, ironically, cost-effectiveness. It may be that, especially for those living around Hancock Park, the battle lost over the Crenshaw station in 1983 actually catalyzed residents to come out against the subway as a whole. The primary arguments of homeowners against an elevated, surfacing in 1987, concerned blight and noise rather than fears of high-density development. While it was at this later point that RTD gave up on the idea of rapid transit, it cannot be proven to what degree the decision was due to the activists (versus the influence of area lawmakers holding the power to provide or withdraw federal support). Cries

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> See Note 57.

among minority groups of racism were not as prevalent in the latter two controversies as subway opponents found more legitimate (read: politically-correct) concerns to express.

To better understand and deal with the question of racism influencing the opposition to and rerouting of Metro Rail, it is worth examining the idea and history of parochialism across Los Angeles. Throughout the entire planning process, we see the common thread of local citizens and politicians fighting for their particular interests rather than focusing on the regional interest of implementing rapid transit—parochialism, to put it in a word. This was true in Mid-Wilshire, as well as in Hollywood and North Hollywood (the line's northern terminus); as even Waxman is apt to admit, it was because of local insistence (and the political advantages to following through) that the subway was to turn north to the San Fernando Valley instead of continuing toward Westwood and Santa Monica.<sup>61</sup> In some ways, the Congressman, in his reconsideration of the entire Metro Rail route, exposes the idea that the chosen route was in a way fabricated to please as many voices (and voters on Capitol Hill), even if Waxman himself might be guilty of political play.

The idea of local politics dominating regional interests should not be a surprising one in Los Angeles. Presently, the physical size of the city is so large that many other major US cities (Cleveland, San Francisco, Pittsburgh, Minneapolis, Saint Louis, and Boston, to name a few) could fit together within the confines of Los Angeles's municipal borders. With such size, disputes between the different regions are to be expected; indeed the San Fernando Valley, an area comprising half of the city's land but separated from the Los Angeles Basin by the Santa Monica Mountains, has twice in the past forty years attempted unsuccessfully to become an

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<sup>61</sup> See Note 31.

independent municipality.<sup>62</sup> West Hollywood split from Los Angeles in 1984, and Hollywood unsuccessfully attempted the same in more recent years.<sup>63</sup> Such secessions make it easier for residents in neighborhoods to prevent regional projects from directly affecting them. As one USC professor was quoted as saying, “people are only interested in very close neighborhoods [...] As long as it's not in their immediate bailiwick, they're fairly indifferent.”<sup>64</sup>

Prior to the push for Metro Rail, the City of Los Angeles, in the 1970s, unveiled what it called the “Centers Plan.” This general plan designated twenty-nine “centers” across the city to be targeted for high-density growth; eventually, each of these centers would be connected by rapid transit.<sup>65</sup> SCRTD began its rail planning process by attempting to connect several of these centers, but was soon thwarted by politicians wanting the line to serve the San Fernando Valley neighborhood of North Hollywood—this coming in the aftermath of the first San Fernando secession attempt. The breakdown of the proposed integration of city centers with rapid transit showed that local interests carried much weight with those deciding on the route choice; subsequently, it showed the affluent and well-connected residents of Hancock Park and the rest of Mid-Wilshire that, if they were to speak up, their concerns would likely be addressed.

The history of Los Angeles also provides clues as to the effect of racism in the opposition to Metro Rail on Wilshire. Hancock Park, along with the better-known City of Beverly Hills several miles to the west, were both planned communities erected on land grants in the 1910s

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<sup>62</sup> B Drummond Ayres, Jr, “Los Angeles, Long Fragmented, Faces Threat of Secession by the San Fernando Valley,” 29 May 1996, *The Los Angeles Times*, <<http://www.nytimes.com/1996/05/29/us/los-angeles-long-fragmented-faces-threat-of-secession-by-the-sanfernando-valley.html>>.

<sup>63</sup> Rick Orlov, “Secession drive changed San Fernando Valley, Los Angeles,” 3 Nov 2012, *Los Angeles Daily News*, <<http://www.dailynews.com/2012/11/04/secession-drive-changed-san-fernando-valley-los-angeles>>.

<sup>64</sup> Patt Morrison, “L.A.’s Own Brands of Parochialism,” 15 January 1997, *The Los Angeles Times*, <[http://articles.latimes.com/1997-01-15/local/me-18843\\_1\\_storm-coverage](http://articles.latimes.com/1997-01-15/local/me-18843_1_storm-coverage)>.

<sup>65</sup> *Railtown*, pages 70-73.

and 20s. Beverly Hills quickly incorporated itself as a municipality in 1914, but Hancock Park remained part of the City of Los Angeles. Homes sold within Hancock Park came attached with restrictive covenants, preventing non-whites (often including Jewish, Italian, and Russian individuals) from moving into the area.<sup>66</sup> When, in 1948, renown black jazz musician Nat King Cole purchased and moved into a Hancock Park home by way of a “‘dummy’ Caucasian purchaser,” neighbors were said to have been put “in a quandary.”<sup>67,68</sup> This was at the around the time that the Supreme Court ruled that restrictive covenants were unconstitutional. While the *Los Angeles Times* noted that, after King Cole’s purchase, “many of his admirers have visited the neighborhood to look at it,” it did not later report on the desecration of his home’s front lawn by members of the Ku Klux Klan, nor on the poisoning of his dog.<sup>69</sup> One 1975 *Times* writer described Hancock Park as an exclusive neighborhood that had changed very little since its development fifty years previous. As one mother is quoted:

“That’s one thing about living here. You just don’t have too many options,” she says. “Los Angeles High just isn’t desirable. It’s 95% black now, you know.” (Actually, the student body is 72.7% black, 15.8% Asian, 9.6% Spanish surnames and some 2% “everyone else.”) “And John Burroughs Jr. High just doesn’t meet my children’s needs. It’s not because whites are in the minority, but because the

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<sup>66</sup> Edmon J Rodman, “Let my people go ... to Hancock Park,” 9 Apr 2014, *Jewish Journal*, <[http://www.jewishjournal.com/los\\_angeles/article/let\\_my\\_people\\_go\\_...\\_to\\_hancock\\_park](http://www.jewishjournal.com/los_angeles/article/let_my_people_go_..._to_hancock_park)>.

<sup>67</sup> Suzan Filipek, “Nat King Cole documentary reveals Hancock Park’s racist past,” 29 May 2014, *Larchmont Chronicle* (monthly Mid-Wilshire newspaper), <<http://larchmontchronicle.com/nat-king-cole-documentary-reveals-hancock-parks-racist-past/>>.

<sup>68</sup> “Hancock Park Home Purchase Stirs Quandary,” 3 August 1948 (B16), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.

<sup>69</sup> Catherine Ammann, “Why Celebs love Hancock Park, Los Angeles,” 5 July 2012, *LA Grove Living*, <<http://lagroveliving.com/2012/07/hancock-park-los-angeles/>>.

atmosphere is not a positive situation. Unfortunately, many parents feel this way, so the white middle class leaves.”<sup>70</sup>

Racism, however veiled, was more than likely on the minds of at least some Hancock Park residents in the early 1980s. Unfortunately, because it was so veiled, to what degree it precisely influenced the Metro Rail protests may never be determined.

In the end, instead of fighting against residents’ fears and concerns, RTD would come to decide against rapid transit, convinced with the help of State Senator David Roberti to implement the Vermont Avenue alternative (which would run through his jurisdiction). The Vermont corridor gave RTD the advantage by having to appeal to an area dominated by hospitals and very few homes.<sup>71</sup> While the expected ridership may have been lower for stations on Vermont, there was no resistance to be found there against the construction of rapid transit. The solution for RTD, ultimately, was to take its project to an audience less liable to protest.

### **Conclusion and afterward: The Purple Line extension**

The primary reasons for Metro Rail’s diversion away from Wilshire Boulevard in the 1980s included local politicians’ leverage over federal transportation funding, homeowners’ ability to band together, as well as racial and parochial influences on the former two groups of people. Over the following two decades, a worsening of traffic and overcapacity of buses on the arterial gave rise to support of continuing the subway from its existing terminus of the Wilshire stub track—rebranded as the Purple Line to differentiate it from the North Hollywood-bound service, the Red Line—at Western Avenue. A new, Latino mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa, made it

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<sup>70</sup> Tia Gindick, “Hancock Park: Half-Century Report: The Life-style of Hancock Park,” 23 Nov 1975 (E1), *The Los Angeles Times*, Proquest.

<sup>71</sup> *Railtown*, pages 96-98.

one of his primary projects to get such an extension of the Wilshire subway underway. Even Representative Waxman was onboard with the subway at this time, motioning Congress to repeal the prohibition of funding for tunneling under the gaseous areas in 2006, reportedly being finally convinced of construction and operation safety.<sup>72,73</sup> It would seem as though the roadblocks against a Wilshire subway were being eroded.

Controversies still arose in the finalizations of the route and stations, however, and history would come to repeat itself at least in part. The first, once again, involved the inclusion of a station at Crenshaw and Wilshire Boulevards. Area residents and commuters shared mixed opinions on the station at a public hearing, although the president of a homeowners' association likened the idea of a station to ““a bad dream that keeps coming up.””<sup>74</sup> Crenshaw did not end up making the final list of stops for the Purple Line extension—Metro (LACMTA) did not make public the reason for the cut. In Beverly Hills, resident activists also went on record against plans to tunnel underneath Beverly Hills High School, arguing students' lives would be risked should an explosion or earthquake occur.<sup>75,76</sup> A community newspaper produced a video dramatically

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<sup>72</sup> “Will L.A.’s ‘subway to the sea’ finally get there?,” 6 Nov 2014, *The Los Angeles Times*, <<http://www.latimes.com/opinion/editorials/la-ed-westside-subway-purple-line-groundbreaking-20141107-story.html>>.

<sup>73</sup> HR 4653, 21 Sept 2006, *109th Congress, 2d Session*, US Government Printing Office, <<http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-109hr4653rfs/pdf/BILLS-109hr4653rfs.pdf>>.

<sup>74</sup> Neal Broverman, “The Crenshaw Station Debate--Dispatches from the Subway Meeting,” 19 Mar 2010, Curbed Los Angeles, <[http://la.curbed.com/archives/2010/03/the\\_crenshaw\\_station\\_debatedispatches\\_from\\_the\\_subway\\_meeting.php](http://la.curbed.com/archives/2010/03/the_crenshaw_station_debatedispatches_from_the_subway_meeting.php)>.

<sup>75</sup> Neal Broverman, “Eighties Subway-Staller Henry Waxman Enters Purple Line Fray,” 13 Apr 2012, Curbed Los Angeles, <[http://la.curbed.com/archives/2012/04/eighties\\_subwaystaller\\_henry\\_waxman\\_enters\\_purple\\_line\\_fray.php](http://la.curbed.com/archives/2012/04/eighties_subwaystaller_henry_waxman_enters_purple_line_fray.php)>.

<sup>76</sup> Nevermind the fact that a cluster of oil wells is being actively maintained on the BHHS campus, providing the city and school system with up to \$1 million per year.

juxtaposing scenes of gaseous fires (recalling the 1985 Fairfax explosion) with images of teenagers enjoying school facilities.<sup>77</sup> The City of Beverly Hills would commission two studies in attempts of proving errors in Metro’s own safety reports, to which Metro found “serious flaws.”<sup>78</sup> While Beverly Hills has had one of its lawsuits against Metro dismissed by a local court, the matter is still not yet settled conclusively.<sup>79</sup>

On 7 November 2014, a groundbreaking ceremony was held outside the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (near Wilshire and Fairfax) for Metro Rail’s Purple Line extension.<sup>80</sup> By year 2025, subway cars will be able to traverse between Union Station and UCLA in the Westwood area. After a delay of roughly 40 years and many hurdles, those living, working, and commuting along Wilshire Boulevard will finally be served with true rapid transit.

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(Adrian Glick Kudler, “Some Bev Hillers Want to Keep That Lucrative BHHS Oil Well,” 29 Sept 2011, Curbed Los Angeles, <[http://la.curbed.com/archives/2011/09/some\\_bev\\_hillers\\_want\\_to\\_keep\\_that\\_lucrative\\_bhhs\\_oil\\_well.php](http://la.curbed.com/archives/2011/09/some_bev_hillers_want_to_keep_that_lucrative_bhhs_oil_well.php)>.)

<sup>77</sup> “No Subway Under BHHS,” YouTube video, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=81tihdzaecc>>.

<sup>78</sup> *Response to Hazard Assessment Study by Exponent*, Metro, 4 Apr 2012, <<http://www.scribd.com/doc/88791643/Metro-Response-to-Hazard-Assessment-Study-by-Exponent>>.

<sup>79</sup> Neal Broverman, “Beverly Hills Loses First Big Legal Battle Against Purple Line,” 3 Apr 2014, Curbed Los Angeles, <[http://la.curbed.com/archives/2014/04/beverly\\_hills\\_loses\\_first\\_big\\_legal\\_battle\\_against\\_purple\\_line.php](http://la.curbed.com/archives/2014/04/beverly_hills_loses_first_big_legal_battle_against_purple_line.php)>.

<sup>80</sup> Dave Sotero, “Long wait over: groundbreaking held for Wilshire Boulevard subway extension,” 10 Nov 2014, The Source: Transportation News & Views, <<http://thesource.metro.net/2014/11/10/long-wait-is-over-groundbreaking-ceremony-today-for-subway-extension-under-wilshire-boulevard/>>.

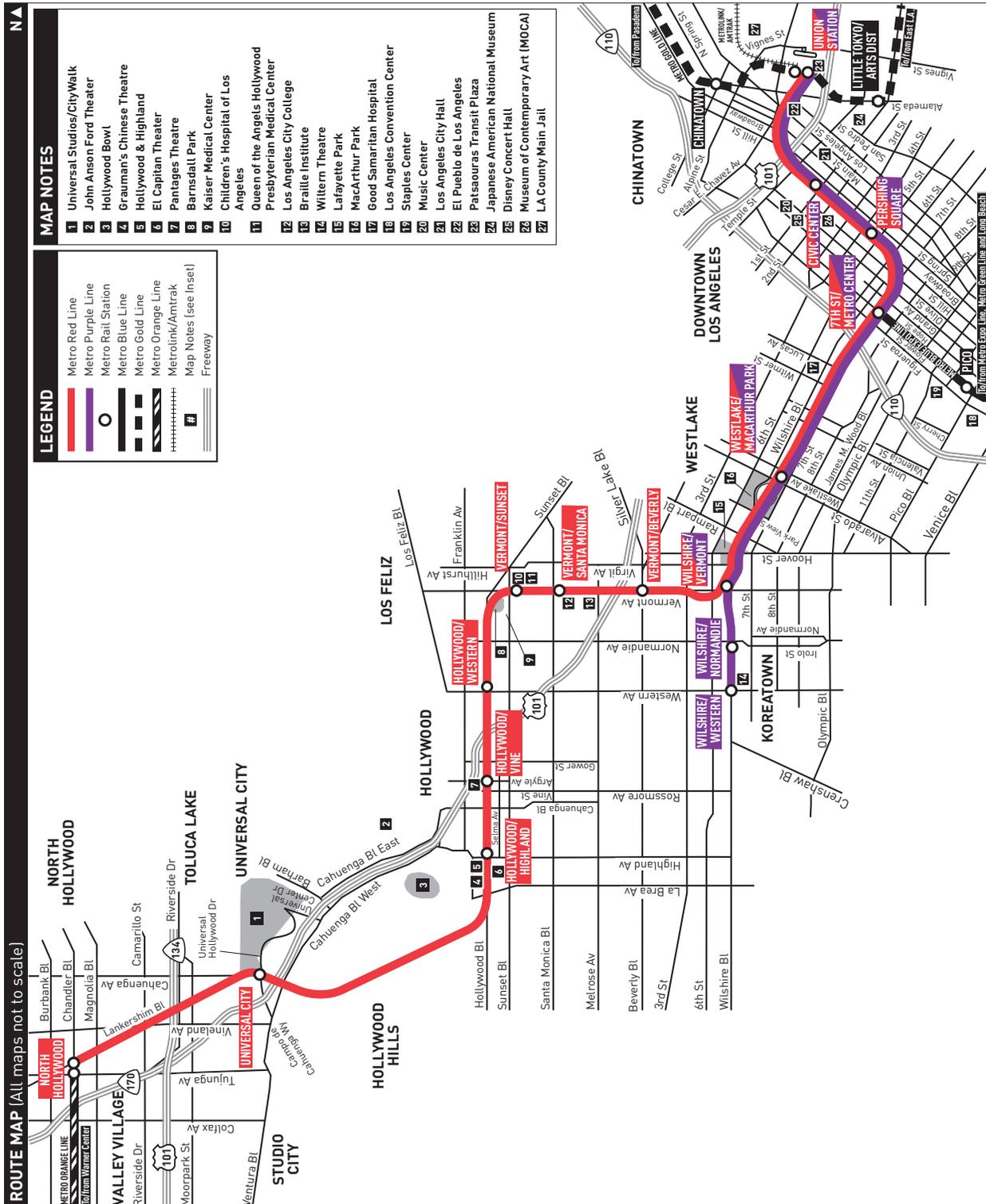


Figure 7. Map of Metro Rail Red and Purple Lines with local streets, as currently operated.

(“Red & Purple Lines,” Metro, <[http://media.metro.net/riding\\_metro/bus\\_overview/images/802.pdf](http://media.metro.net/riding_metro/bus_overview/images/802.pdf)>).



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