

Building From Underground Up

MTA's proposed 'Subway to Sea' line should be used to spur mixed-use developments around stations.

By **ERNESTO VASQUEZ** and **JEFFREY MAYER**

WITH the passage of Measure R on Nov. 4, the voters of Los Angeles County have determined to set aside \$40 billion for mass transit, including that longest-simmering of metropolitan infrastructure dreams, the "Subway to the Sea."

The route and station stops for the Subway to the Sea have yet to be determined, although the front-running plans are westward extensions from either the Wilshire-Western subway stop, underneath Wilshire Boulevard to the sea, or from the Hollywood-Highland stop, tunneling west below Santa Monica Boulevard.

The Subway to the Sea will no doubt become one of the most memorable mass-transit projects of the era – and, yet, it is also something much larger: a once-ever opportunity to responsibly boost and channel real estate development through the Westside, creating a connected, less-congested and breathing city.

The Subway to the Sea has the potential to be not only tunnel and trains, but rather a string of urban jewels, known more prosaically as "transportation-oriented developments" or TODs.

Though thought of as a transit agency, the builder of the Subway to the Sea, the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Agency, is actually the region's stealth development agency, and much more powerful than any development agency. Unlike other development agencies in name, the MTA can not only determine subway stop locations, but then can strongly encourage large-scale real estate development on and around subway stops. It's exactly where future construction should take place.

Scarcely known to the public (even to local urban planners) is the fact that the MTA has the power of eminent domain, in addition to its legal authorization to buy land.

Indeed, not only does the MTA obtain land for subway stops, it must buy surrounding parcels for "staging areas" to support the heavy work of tunneling. These staging areas become surplus when the subway stops are finished – but the staging area land is perfect for urban density and "omni-use" development. The MTA, in fact, has already proceeded down this very course by undertaking "joint development opportunities" on MTA subway properties, most notably the Hollywood and Highland Center, the star-crossed yet still catalytic and successful mall in the revitalized Tinseltown. Joint development is proceeding at many stops, including Hollywood and Vine, which engages a W Hotel, condos and luxury apartments as well the Pantages Theater.

Aim high

The exciting reality is that the MTA must do more of the same on the Subway to the Sea, but on an even larger and more sophisticated scale. In assembling land parcels for the Subway to the Sea, the MTA might do well to stretch and overshoot, and buy more rather than less.

Then, working in concert with private developers and architects to better assure market validation, the MTA should move forward with dense, mixed-use developments, creating lively, breathing, vital "urban villages" or "minidistricts" around each stop. Ideally, such subway neighborhoods would be somewhat self-sufficient to encourage walking – having such amenities as grocery stores, restaurants and libraries – but also inviting to pedestrians on surrounding streets or subway denizens from other stops.

Perhaps national design competitions could be held for each subway neighborhood to help ensure that evocative or iconic architecture rules the day. Imagine a string of subway neighborhoods, each remarkable for its beauty, vitality and functionality, stretching from Hollywood to the coast. What is truly remarkable is that with the passage of Measure R, such a vision is not so utopian as practical, possible and necessary.

Not only can subway neighborhoods provide homes for the inevitable growth in Los Angeles' population, they can reduce traffic – the greater the number of subway neighborhoods, the greater the chance a resident rides the subway to work, visits nightspots in the evening by the tube or takes the family to



Red Line: Hollywood-Highland subway stop.

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beach by rail come Saturday.

With the Subway to the Sea, we can make Los Angeles a better city to live in – with reduced congestion and pollution – and help preserve and enhance property values. It is a time for bold visions.

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