

What Will the Future of L.A. Transit Look Like?

By [Gene Maddaus](#)

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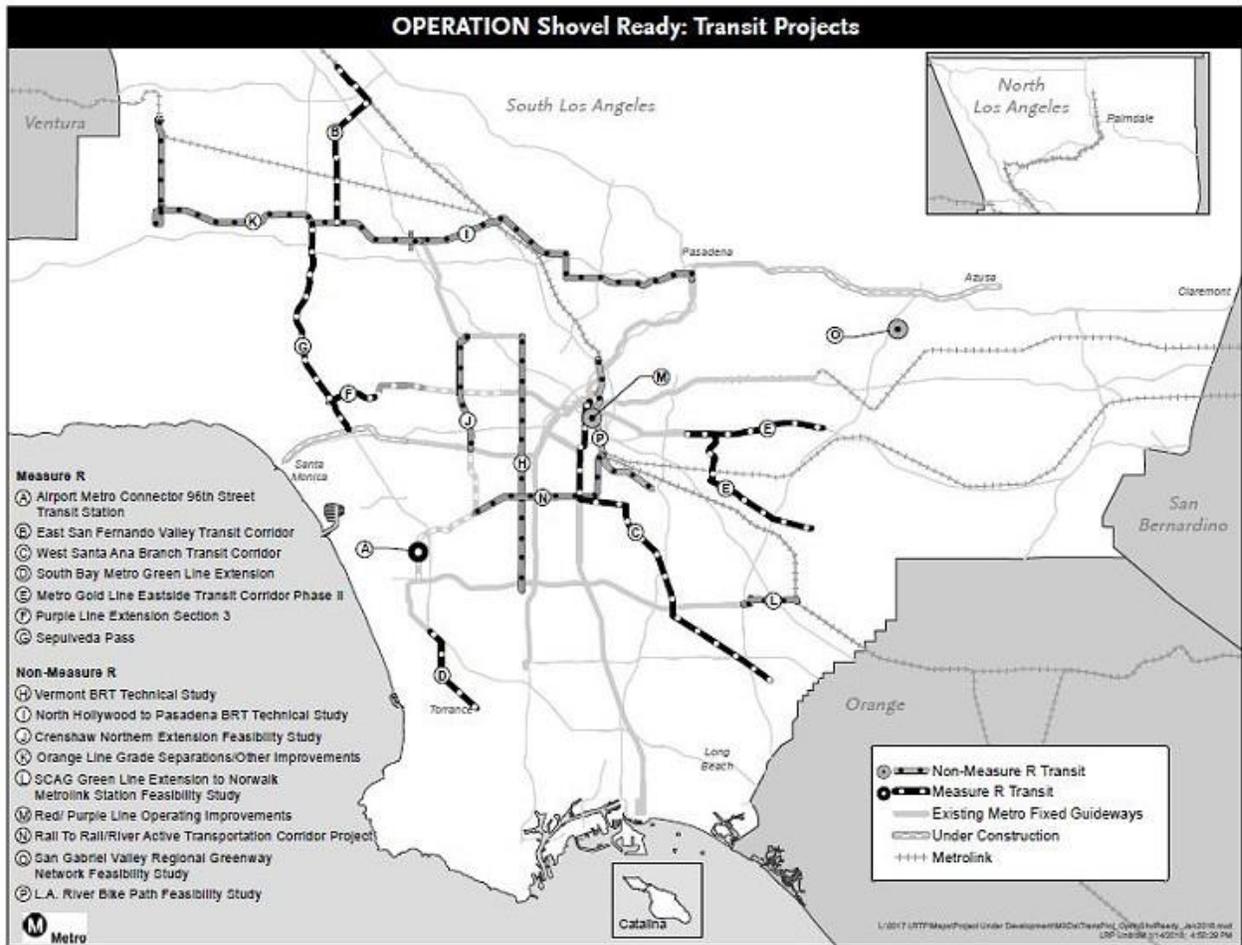


What does the future hold for Los Angeles transit? We will know a lot more tomorrow, when the Metropolitan Transportation Authority unveils its plan for a new half-cent sales tax measure.

The MTA has been eyeing the November 2016 ballot for years, hoping to win the two-thirds vote needed to approve a new tax and raise \$120 billion for new rail projects. The agency has been soliciting input from cities and community groups throughout the county, in what it calls a "bottom-up" process.

Last fall, the agency received a massive list of projects — with an estimated cost as high as \$273 billion. Since then, staffers have been culling the list based on projected ridership and other performance criteria.

We don't know exactly what's on the list, but we can make an informed guess. Here is what the MTA calls its "shovel-ready" projects. This is probably a pretty good starting point:



via MTA

The big theme here is providing north-south connections, which would turn the current hub-and-spoke system into more of a grid.

The big-ticket item — the one that should get the lion's share of attention — is marked "G." That's the Sepulveda Pass tunnel, which will connect the Orange Line to the Wilshire subway ("F") and the Expo Line. Mayor Eric Garcetti has talked about having a seamless route from the north San Fernando Valley, through the Sepulveda Pass, all the way to LAX. So a key thing to pay attention to is whether that project gets extended past the Expo Line down Sepulveda Boulevard to Westchester and the airport. That segment does not appear on the above map, and it would be a pretty big deal if it were included.

Another big one to look out for is marked "J" — the Crenshaw northern extension. West Hollywood has been clamoring for access to the rail grid, and this is its big chance. Expect to see the Crenshaw Line extended north to the Purple Line and on to the Red Line.

Further east is the Vermont Avenue bus rapid transit line ("H"). Decades ago, there were plans to build a subway down Vermont. Now the plan is to build a dedicated busway, akin to the Orange Line, down the center median of Vermont. It's possible, though it would be a surprise, that this could be turned into a light-rail line.

Speaking of the Orange Line, another question is whether the Orange Line bus ("K") will be converted to light rail. The San Fernando Valley also is expecting funding for the Van Nuys Boulevard light-rail project ("B"). San Fernando Valley leaders and groups like the Valley Industry and Commerce Association are pushing hard for both these items, arguing that the Valley got screwed on Measure R, the 2008 transit tax.

And speaking of inequities, the Southeast cities (Maywood, Huntington Park, South Gate, etc.) are lobbying hard for the Eco-Rapid Line ("C"), which would run from Union Station down to Artesia. They also feel they got left out before, and they're looking to make up for lost time. This route might also include a stop in the DTLA Arts District.

It'll also be interesting to see whether the South Bay extension to Torrance ("D") is left as is, or if the MTA tries to reroute it to run down Prairie Avenue past the new Inglewood NFL stadium. And Glendale and Burbank are keeping an eye on the North Hollywood-to-Pasadena connection ("I"), which right now is slated as a busway.

Rail will be only a fraction of the total \$120 billion budget. A lot of it will go to highway improvements, especially as you get farther away from downtown L.A., as well as operations and maintenance. There also is likely to be some money to do the "Rail to River" project — a bike path down an old railbed on Slauson Avenue ("N") — as well as something to fill the gaps in DTLA on the L.A. River bike path ("P").

The current plan, subject to change, is to sunset the new tax after 40 years, in 2057. The Measure R tax, which currently expires in 2039, would also be extended to 2057. (Measure J, which would have extended the Measure R sunset by 30 years, narrowly missed the two-thirds threshold in the 2012 election.)

As the MTA plans projects for the next four decades, a key issue is going to be scheduling. For some participants in the process, it won't be enough to see their project on the list — they'll want it in the first decade.

The staff recommendation, which comes out tomorrow, is just the first step. The 13-member MTA board will take feedback and likely make modifications before voting sometime this summer to put the measure on the November ballot.

Stay tuned.