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Reporting Decisions  
Paper #1

Los Angeles politicians have been dancing around the idea of a Subway to the Sea for decades. That dance has a story to tell, prolonged by a series of unfolding decisions and events. The project was born in 1980, but killed six years later and, once more for good measure, a decade after that. It remained dead for another decade, until Congressman Henry Waxman reversed decades-old opposition to federal funding for such a subway. This essay explores that reversal.

Most official histories cite 1985 as the year the subway derailed. That year, an explosion at a Ross Dress-For-Less store near Wilshire and Fairfax, part of Waxman's district injured dozens. It was, triggered when sparks from a Ross worker clocking in ignited methane gas built up in the store's basement. The gas had been released by nearby tunneling work. Concern about the safety of tunneling through methane zones became Waxman's justification for demanding a year later that Congress ban federal funding of the Wilshire Subway. Some reports, though, suggest it wasn't his only motivation.<sup>i</sup>

As many news reports note, support for a subway was further undermined in 1995 when work on the Red Line route from Downtown to the San Fernando Valley caused a sinkhole to collapse under Hollywood Boulevard. A series of safety violations and inefficiencies among rail contractors worsened the public's perception. By 1998, voters passed a measure banning the use of taxpayer funds for subways. These timelines are well documented in later news stories, particularly those surrounding Waxman's 2004 turnabout and the re-emergence of plans for a Subway to the Sea.

To understand what was different in 2004 from other times the Subway was revived, it's important for observers to understand how a Subway to the Sea has been situated by the media in the public psyche, such as in this account by Chris Hawthorne of the *Los Angeles Times*.

“In a way unique among transit projects being considered, it could trace a new urban blueprint here, recasting the old image of Wilshire as a linear downtown for an age of density and knitting the idea of Los Angeles — the city, not the collection of retail centers and red carpets — back

together. It could turn a neon-bright symbol of L.A.'s love affair with the private car into the best-used transit corridor in Southern California: the strip as civic spine.”<sup>ii</sup>

In Hawthorne's depiction, the Subway to the Sea represents an opportunity for re-invention in Los Angeles. In many ways, it could be an indicator of growth. The story might not be “the Subway to the Sea,” the story might be “L.A.'s evolution,” and the Subway to the Sea and all the decisions surrounding it might be key timepoints in that story and shaping its direction.

It's difficult to extrapolate Waxman's decision as the key pivot point in plans for a Subway to the Sea (indeed, more than three years later, the project is still conceptual). Still, the move does signal, as D.J. Waldie, in an *LA Times* commentary, put it “Los Angeles might be grown up enough for transit.” Waldie, moreover, recognized a motivation for the turnabout that few other stories seemed to catch: Waxman's opposition might not have been based just on safety concerns, and his shifting opinion in 2005 may have had as much to do with a changing political picture in L.A. as new safety technology in tunnels.

“Let's be blunt: The Red Line subway stopped at Western because of Anglo homeowner fears of 'those people' coming to their neighborhood (and Anglo shop owner fears that subway

now that it's not illegal. Now we can have a practical discussion about it.'”<sup>iv</sup>

In a sense, Waxman's turnaround, whatever it's motivation, was a clear signal times had changed. But using the methodology of Neustadt and May, one would want to know where Waxman's decision comes from. What was known to reporters and Waxman in the “now” of 2005 was very different from the “then” of 1985, or even 1995. Most media accounts did a good job of telling the story

Reporters got the whens, whats, wheres and who's right. Where they might have faltered a bit in their coverage was explaining the hows and whys and in the placement of the involved individuals a bit better. Most notably, I might have wanted to know more about why, finally, Metro invited the panel of experts to study tunneling safety. Not who introduced a motion when, but why such a motion was introduced in 2004, and not 2002 or 2001 or 2007.

Many questions should have been asked. How did politicians know technology and tunneling practices had progressed far enough that the time was ripe to convene such a panel, or were there other reasons for the panel's timing? Who was on the panel and why? Third, what was different about tunneling under Wilshire past Western from other areas where tunneling occurred, either for subways or other projects? How had those differences changed or evolved over the years?

Most coverage didn't answer these questions, but did do well with their contextualization of the broader problems facing the subway plans. That's not necessarily a problem, especially for publications like *USA Today* and the *Economist*, which had broader audiences to address.

The latter, for example, opened a November 2006 story by setting the scene of a rail network gradually growing around Los Angeles.<sup>v</sup> This article takes the placement a step further by contextualizing it not just in terms of the direct timeline from the Ross explosion through Waxman's resistance and the problems of the 1990s, but exploring more broadly why traffic is so bad in L.A. and what the aforementioned timeline meant for clearing, or rather, not clearing, congestion.

“... Indeed, according to the Census Bureau, the 12m-strong metropolis is the most densely

populated urban area in America. This unusual pattern of "dense sprawl" makes it both hard to manage without a public-transport system and hard to build one, says Brian Taylor ... The result is a half-finished system that stops short of one of the city's main commercial districts. It is the equivalent of a New York **subway** system that does not stop in midtown, or a London underground that bypasses the West End. ”

This article doesn't just say “Los Angeles doesn't have a subway and that's bad.” It says exactly why it's bad. It “sophisticates the initial stereotype” about Los Angeles and its traffic, and about the possible solution of a subway, plots relevant events along a timeline, and allows for inferences to be drawn as new evidence comes in (where what was built actually leads, why there's no money for the expensive subway, and why it was expensive to build in the first place).

Some media accounts give credit to the new momentum that transit gained when Antonio Villaraigosa was elected mayor in 2005. The safety panel did its study only months after Villaraigosa took office.<sup>vi</sup> Transportation did play a major role in the mayoral election, even in its first round, when Villaraigosa competed with then-mayor James Hahn and three other high-profile local politicians for the office, all of whom had transit platforms.

In early 2005, in an article describing the first round of mayoral elections that year, the *Los Angeles Times* contrasted Hahn's approach to transportation with Villaraigosa and other candidates, citing data showing 24 percent of voters polled by the *Times* said transportation was their most important topic, second only to education.<sup>vii</sup> It also elaborated on Hahn's opponents' criticism of the mayor for his lack of attention to Metro's board. This helped Villaraigosa on the issue when he took office, because his interest in transit appeared more starkly contrasted with Hahn's piecemeal approach. (Interestingly, two other candidates opposed the Red Line extension but supported the so-called Expo Line light rail to Culver City which, unlike the Subway to the Sea, is actually under construction now).

It's worth noting, of course, that the *Economist* article mentioned above was published more than a year after Villaraigosa was elected, the APTA panel conducted its study and Waxman reversed course. It did hint at Villaraigosa's clout within his party at the time of the “changing of the political guard in Washington, D.C.,” though, noting how that may have helped as Waxman pushed legislation

through Congress reversing his moratorium

By late 2007, when then-President Bush finally signed the omnibus spending bill with that reversal, coverage depicted a victory for Villaraigosa and offered Waxman an opportunity to save face by including a quote expressing his confidence tunneling could happen more safely. However, it also makes it clear the bill's signing changed little in actual terms.

“Despite the success in Washington, the 'subway to the sea' is still far from a sure thing,” wrote *City News Service*.<sup>viii</sup>

Most of the stories, though, championed Waxman's turnaround. Some outlets didn't let him off the hook. Alan Mittlestaedt of the *LA CityBeat* put Waxman squarely in the sights of his “LA Sniper” column.<sup>ix</sup> As the name of his column implies, Mittlestaedt wasn't gentle. Where other accounts at that time depicted a transformed Waxman now lobbying Congress to remove his moratorium, Mittlestaedt demanded more, suggesting that Waxman needed to provide real leadership, especially now, since even the buses on Wilshire slog through in traffic.

“You still could do so much more for L.A.'s transit programs,” Mittlestaedt writes.

The columnist also took an approach few other journalists took. He spoke to transit riders along the Wilshire corridor. There is a sense in this column, for example, that he was riding the bus as he wrote it. What's more, Mittlestaedt hinted at other possible influences on the real nature of the problem, saying to Waxman “you got your colleagues in Congress to ban the use of federal dollars paying for any tunneling west of Fairfax; a ban tinged with your constituents' racism that, to your credit, you finally lifted this year.” The hint was passing and placed in a paragraph where Mittlestaedt also acknowledged Waxman had little public perception, negative or positive, but it was there.

Zach Behrens, the author of the *LAist* blog takes the call for leadership from Waxman a step further. He contrasts Waxman's 20-year opposition of the subway with his introduction of major legislation combating climate change.<sup>x</sup>

“The guy who derailed the subway is actually a little green bean himself,” Behrens writes.

“Does a subway fit in anywhere in ozone protection and a safe climate?”

In fact, comments to Behren's post, which cites Mittlestaedt's work, give a bit better a picture of public opinion (although the anonymity and self-selection of the comments mean they're imperfect barometers). One commenter notes Waxman is part of an even broader, longer story of subway opposition dating back to 1962. A handful of others illustrate how frustrated the public was with the lack of a subway, asking what to do to get something done now (then).

Yet the question not answered satisfactorily in all of this is what changed in 2005. Why was it possible to convene a fact-finding panel? Why did so few articles mention that Jon Christian, one of the panel's members, chaired a committee looking into Boston's “Big Dig” and proposing that management expedite its completion? Granted, some touched on it. Some knew Waxman was “in the room” when the panel was selected<sup>xi</sup>. But that “why?” question persists. Why were these people selected when they were selected, and why did Waxman get a pick (or, a better alternative to that question, why didn't he just get to pick earlier, if that's all it took to get him to agree)? Knowing the answers to these questions might help the next time the Subway sinks out of the realm of possibility.

- i Groves, Martha, "In a reversal, Waxman backs Westside Subway," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 17 2005
- ii Hawthorne, Christopher, "Critics Notebook; Finally, on the right track," *Los Angeles Times*, Sept. 27, 2006
- iii Waldie, D.J., "Go west, young subway rider; Changing transit priorities mirror the changing face of the city, with convoluted routes of the past leading into an unrealized future," *Los Angeles Times*, Dec. 5, 2005.
- iv Kasindorf, Martin, "Gridlock restarts talks on L.A. subway extension," *USA Today*, Feb. 9, 2006
- v "Pipe Dreams; Public transport in Los Angeles," in *The Economist*, Nov. 25 2006
- vi Fausset, Richard, "Experts dig into subway project; the mayor asks a team of engineers and transit whizzes to determine if the Red Line can be extended along Wilshire without igniting gases," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 15, 2005.
- vii Bernstein, Sharon and Liu, Caitlin, "Cars Jam Road to Victory; Los Angeles voters see transportation-related issues as major problems, and each candidate for mayor has a plan to deal with them," *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 16, 2005
- viii *City News Service*, Dec. 20 2007.
- ix Mittelstaedt, Alan, "Dedicating Line 720 to Henry Waxman," *Los Angeles, CityBeat* Sept. 6, 2007
- x Behrens, Zach, "Wilshire Subway Watch: Congressman Henry Waxman, Subway Enemy No. 1," [www.laist.com](http://www.laist.com), Sept. 6, 2007
- xi Fausset, Richard, "Experts dig into subway project; the mayor asks a team of engineers and transit whizzes to determine if the Red Line can be extended along Wilshire without igniting gases," *Los Angeles Times*, Oct. 15, 2005.