

SAVE METRO

Rail Lines Offered for Sale Are Focus of Transit Debate

By RONALD B. TAYLOR, Times Staff Writer

When the Southern Pacific and Santa Fe railroads offered recently to sell several little-used branch lines to public agencies, it was like opening the switch and clearing the Los Angeles mass transit effort onto a faster track, say transportation experts.

These branch lines, if developed for trolley-like "light rail" or heavier commuter trains, could link downtown Los Angeles to Santa Monica, San Bernardino and Santa Ana, according to the Los Angeles County Transportation Commission. One of the lines—the Burbank branch—would provide an east-west route across the traffic-clogged San Fernando Valley.

But transit officials are not the only ones interested in these valuable strips of land, which the railroads are threatening to sell piecemeal to private land developers if public agencies will not make commitments soon to buy them. Meanwhile, these agencies are beset by strong political resistance from homeowners who are opposed to commuter trains whizzing by near their back yards.

"It . . . makes more sense to put a mass transit system on the other side of the moon," said one angry

San Fernando Valley homeowner, Tom Herman.

A Westwood area resident, Steve Kunin, snapped, "A rail transportation system isn't needed."

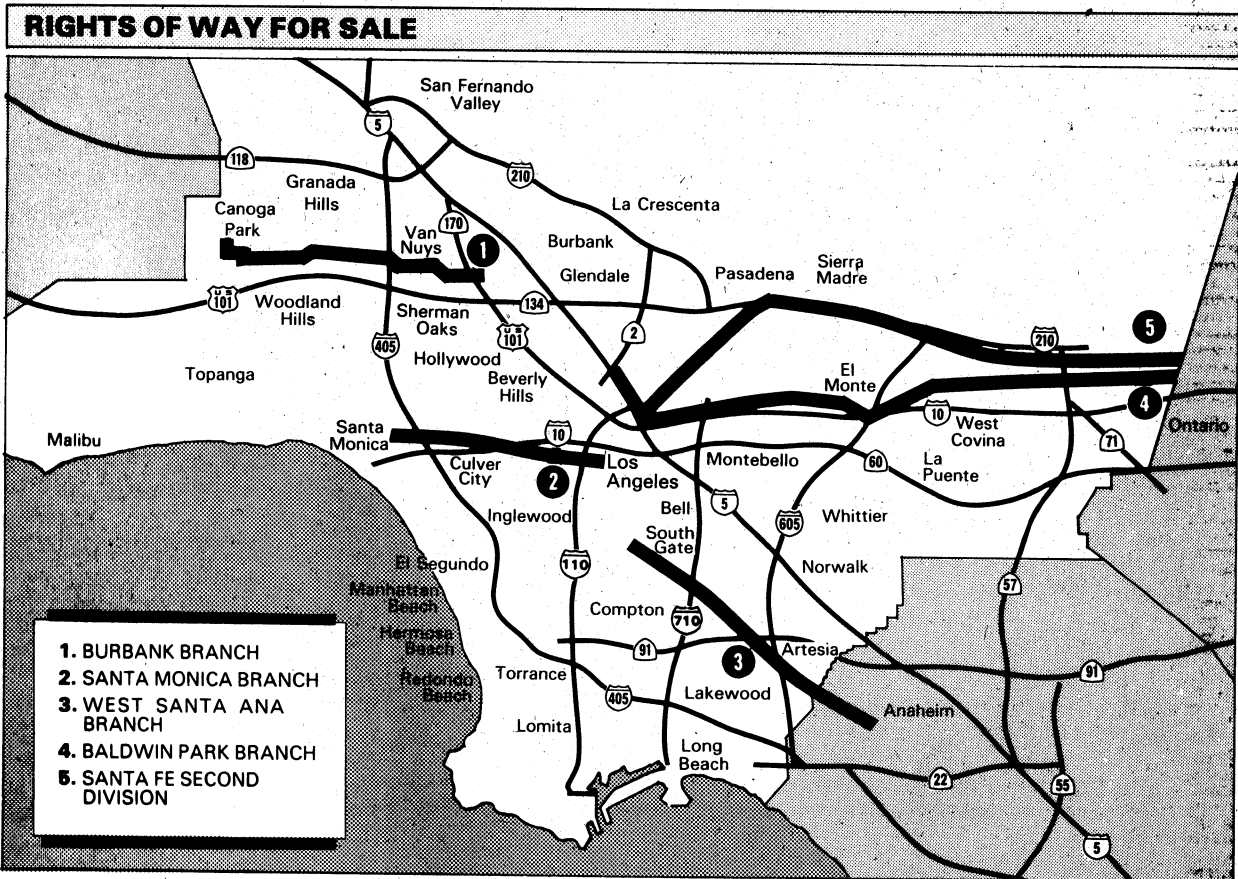
Such sentiments have coalesced into a dozen protest groups across the San Fernando Valley and the Westside. This, in turn, has put the squeeze on politicians who support mass transit but who are fearful of offending their constituents.

The Transportation Commission—charged with developing a 150-mile mass transit rail system in Los Angeles County—wants to secure all the valuable rights of way it can now and decide which ones will be used later.

"We are not trying to jam rail down anybody's throat," said Neil Peterson, the commission's executive director. "We are trying to preserve the rights of way so that future generations don't have to spend millions and millions of dollars."

The agency will not have money to build rail systems along these routes any time in the foreseeable future, Peterson said. But once in public ownership, the

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lands could be left as open space, used for bike paths or sold, he said.

The lines are being abandoned for complex reasons that have to do with deregulation, loss of freight business and corporate mergers that left the Southern Pacific Transportation Co.'s new owners with a huge debt they are repaying by selling property.

Four routes are offered by Southern Pacific, one by the Atchison, Topeka & the Santa Fe Railway. They include:

- Santa Monica branch, extending 14 miles from the coast, along Exposition Boulevard, past USC and the Coliseum to what will soon be the Long Beach Light Rail Line.

- West Santa Ana branch, a 12.5-mile section linking Orange County to Paramount and the Century Freeway Light Rail Corridor now being built.

- Burbank branch, which runs 14 miles west from North Hollywood along Victory and Chandler boulevards through Van Nuys to Canoga Park.

- State Street/San Bernardino line, which would carry heavier commuter trains from Union Station along a 58-mile route through Baldwin Park to San Bernardino.

- Santa Fe Second Division, a potential commuter train route from Union Station through Pasadena and Azusa to San Bernardino.

The San Bernardino routes, which would travel mostly through industrial and commercial areas that already get a lot of train traffic, have so far not generated the kind of controversy surrounding the other routes.

The Santa Ana route is also free of controversy.

Each of these routes could be linked to the \$3.4-billion Metro Rail subway now under construction or to one or more of the three light rail lines being built in Los Angeles County, officials said.

"What we are trying to do is re-rail Los Angeles," Peterson said. "Basically, we are trying to re-create the old Red Car system," he said, referring to the trolley cars that once trundled along 1,164 miles of track, then were replaced by freeways and autos. The tracks were ripped up, the rights of way abandoned.

Until the railroads put the freight lines on the market, there was little chance a rail network could be re-established. The commission—with a strong push from

its former chairman, county Supervisor Pete Schabarum—has jumped at the chance. Appraisers hired by the commission and the railroads are evaluating the property and putting a price tag on most of the routes. Negotiations could start before the end of the year.

But all of this is still tentative and could easily be derailed by disagreements over route locations and costs. Some are questioning how much can be spent buying these lands at a time when worries about cost overruns already plague Metro Rail and the already-approved light rail projects.

While no price has been mentioned, experts point out that 65 miles of mainline track in Florida recently went for \$250 million and, in Dallas, 20 miles cost \$60 million. Chicago is spending up to \$1 million a mile for pieces of right of way. Transit experts say these deals are financed by the "big credit card" approach: so much down and so much a year.

The biggest source of money for the railroad's properties is the half-cent sales tax earmarked for transit. The county Transportation Commission has about \$800 million in such funds, which, unless eaten by Metro Rail cost overruns, could go toward other projects, including the railroad lands.

Los Angeles County and the cities of Los Angeles, Santa Monica and Culver City have all expressed an interest in helping to secure these transit corridors, transit officials said.

Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley supports buying the rights of way, Deputy Mayor Mike Gage said. However, there are signs the City Council is divided over both the specific routes and the way the commission is proceeding to acquire these lands.

The debate in the San Fernando Valley, where the focus is on selecting a route, is one indication that the political hurdles to buying the routes may prove much tougher than the financial obstacles.

The big questions are: Should the line go underground? Would the best route be along the Southern Pacific's Victory-Chandler corridor that passes through residential areas? Or should a new right of way parallel the Ventura Freeway?

The commission's environmental impact study evaluating these routes is due in March and is anxiously awaited by various factions opposed to one or another of

the alternatives.

Intentionally or not, Southern Pacific turned up the heat in May by announcing that it was putting the Santa Monica, San Bernardino and Santa Ana branches on the block. No mention was made of the Burbank line negotiations because, railroad officials said, the political controversy there has turned the area "into a war zone."

While the May public sale notice did not mention Burbank, the railroad told the Transportation Commission it had to have a quick decision on these lands as well. The commission has waffled, twice putting off decisions on the Burbank right of way and the four individual station properties, while committing nearly \$500,000 in appraisal fees for setting price tags on most of the other railroad offerings.

This has brought a sharp response not only from the Valley, but the Westside as well, where homeowners are concerned about the impact of passenger trains, stations and related commercial developments.

"We are absolutely opposed to any purchasing of property or appraisal of property at this time," said Valley resident Herman of the Eastern Sector Transit Coalition, a homeowner group. He said the recent actions of the commission, however, "have confirmed our worst fears . . . this is a done deal."

"We wouldn't stand in the way of a good system . . . [but] going through residential areas is not appropriate," said Westwood Gardens Civic Assn. spokesman Steve Kunin.

Los Angeles Councilmen Nate Holden and Zev Yaroslavsky have taken the county commission to task for starting negotiations for individual parcels along the Victo-

ry-Chandler right of way while the environmental impact report is still being developed.

"It is ludicrous to spend great sums . . . when a route hasn't even been selected yet," Yaroslavsky said. He urged the commission to put off any decisions until the environmental reports are in and the route selected.

Railroad officials say they cannot wait for the political turmoil to subside. The lands adjacent to the rights of way must be sold immediately and the deals on the rights of ways themselves must be completed by the end of the year, said Southern Pacific spokesman Ken W. Dixon. If public agencies do not take up the lands, he said they will be sold to private developers.

Even if the current controversies are resolved and the effort to re-create some kind of passenger rail network does get out on the fast track, there are no guarantees the idea won't get sidetracked somewhere else down the line.

"Remember, this is Southern California . . . where some people say 'I want it here' while others say 'I don't want it there,' and others say 'I don't want it at all,'" said Fred Silverman, a commission rail expert. "Decision making is not a Southern California strong point."

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