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Gold Line project hits setback

Montclair, Pasadena link delayed

By Fred Ortega
Staff Writer

LOS ANGELES — Top regional transit officials voted unanimously Thursday to leave the Gold Line extension off a critical funding list, dealing a setback to plans for a 24-mile rail link between Pasadena and Montclair.

The 13-member Metropolitan Transportation Authority board effectively delayed construction of the \$1.4 billion project until at least the end of 2009, subject to final approval of the regional funding list by mid-year.

Supporters of the extension had hoped to break ground before year's end, with initial service to Azusa and Glendora late in 2009, said authority CEO Habib Balian.

"But all this will add time to the project, causing a six-month to a year delay," said Balian. "We won't be able to get started when we wanted to."

The Metro Board voted to keep the Gold Line on a secondary list of strategic but unfunded projects within a draft long-range plan. The draft list approved Thursday faces a 45-day public review, with the board to vote on a final plan in June.

The Gold Line project needs placement on the MTA's primary list of funded projects to be considered for matching federal grants.

There is still a possibility for projects like the Gold Line to make it onto that primary list, said MTA board member Richard Katz.

"It is a mistake to assume this (draft) long-range plan is written in stone at this point," he said. "The list may change as it goes forward."

Metro board member John Fasana, a Duarte councilman, left open the possibility of getting the Gold Line on the pri-

mary list by delaying the allocation of \$169 million in state funds until the board votes on the final version of the long-range plan in June. Officials hope some of that money could be used to provide local funding for the line.

Calls to Fasana following the meeting were not returned Thursday.

Fasana was backed by Antonio Villaraigosa, Los Angeles mayor and Metro board vice chair, in deferring the allocation of the funds, which come from the Proposition 1B transportation bonds approved by voters in November 2006. While Metro staffers are recommending the bulk of that money go to bus purchases and retrofits, they have left room for some of the funds to be spent on "miscellaneous transit projects," which could include the Gold Line.

The fact that some of that Proposition 1B money could still be used to provide the local funding needed to get the Gold Line on the primary list was heartening to Nick Conway, executive director of the San Gabriel Valley Council of Governments.

"That is progress, and I think that is a good sign for the Gold Line and the San Gabriel Valley that we are going to persevere and make this dream a reality," said Conway, who characterized delays on a project of the Gold Line's magnitude as "inevitable."

Rep. Hilda Solis said Wednesday she hoped the Gold Line would make the top list.

Solis, D-El Monte, said she and other Congress members had met with Villaraigosa last week and that he had expressed support for the project and its potential to link the rest of Los Angeles County via rail to Ontario International Airport, thereby relieving congestion at LAX.

"I am very disappointed that the MTA failed to recognize the importance of the Metro Gold Line extension in today's vote," Solis said Thursday. "I have worked for years to balance the transportation needs of our region, and I'll continue to push this important project along with my colleagues in Congress and other local officials."

A spokesperson for Villaraigosa did not return calls Thursday.

The project also found itself below Villaraigosa's favored "Subway to the Sea" on the secondary long-range plan list, which Metro officials said was organized according to "performance ranking," or the chances each project has to secure additional funding.

The Gold Line's environmental studies and preliminary designs have been completed and all rights-of-way have been acquired, unlike the mid-Wilshire-to-Santa Monica subway plan.

Gold Line supporters hope to secure up to \$320 million in matching federal grants and \$80 million in local funds for the \$400 million cost of extending the existing line from Pasadena to Azusa. A secondary leg from Azusa to Montclair is slated to begin operation by 2014, and officials are conducting a \$500,000 study to examine extending the line's terminus to Ontario International Airport.