FRAMING, POWER & FORGIVENESS:
An Analysis of the Decision to Build the Expo Line At-Grade in South LA

INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, the Los Angeles Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) has worked diligently to improve and expand access to public transportation throughout the greater Los Angeles region. Within this time span, the MTA has developed nearly a half dozen light rail transit lines and dozens of rapid bus lines and express buses that offer alternative transportation options to citizens across the county. (www.metro.net).

Although its intentions are to serve the community, the MTA often faces resistance from residents who do not want public transit developed in their neighborhood. In some cases, however, opposition is not rooted in a desire to prevent the development of public transit. Instead, the opposition is rooted in concerns about a specific aspect of the development plan. This is the case with the resistance that the MTA faced from South Los Angeles residents when it proposed a plan to develop a light rail transit line from Downtown Los Angeles to the Westside via Exposition Blvd. Residents expressed concerns about the safety of the at-grade (level with the street) design that the MTA proposed for the 4.5 mile route that the light rail “Expo Line” would travel through the community.

Despite the fact that there was overwhelming opposition towards the proposed design for the Expo Line, the MTA chose to move forward with its plan to develop the light rail system as proposed. In this manuscript I will make inferences as to why the MTA made this decision. I will draw from theories on dialogue, framing and agenda-setting, power and rationalization, and finally forgiveness and grace to help interpret this outcome.

DATA COLLECTION METHODOLOGY

In order to gather information about the history and current context of the Expo Line, I consulted transportation expert, Lisa Schweitzer, PhD, who provided me with archival data including articles and blogs that provided information about the controversy leading up to the decision to develop the site. I also reviewed the Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s website, where I gathered public documents that captured the history of why the Expo Line was proposed and how the MTA went about engaging the community in the planning process. In addition, I took a bus ride along the route where the Expo Line is being developed to get a better sense of the community and how it might be impacted by the design. During my visitation to the site, I conducted informal interviews with local residents who expressed their opinions about their new neighbor, the Expo Line. Finally, I conducted several online searches through Google using the following key words:

- MTA Expo Line in South LA
- MTA Expo Line controversy
- Light Rail Line deaths in Los Angeles
- Environmental impacts of light rail system in Los Angeles
- Bernard Parks support of Expo Line
METRO EXPO LINE CASE OVERVIEW

In an effort to expand regional transit and increase public transportation ridership between the Westside of Los Angeles and the city's center, in the year 2000, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority (MTA) of Los Angeles proposed a plan for a light rail transit (the “Expo Line”) that would connect the aforementioned parts of the city via South Los Angeles, Culver City and eventually Santa Monica (MTA, 2005).

The proposal to expand public transit options from Downtown to the Westside was created out of necessity. A 1998 study by the Southern California Association of Governments (SCAG) found that travel conditions on the Westside would worsen by 2020, with average travel times increasing by 26% if the stock of public transit did not increase within that time frame (MTA, 2005). Interstate 10, which runs east to west from the east coast to Santa Monica, is one of the most highly congested commuter routes in Los Angeles, particularly along the approximately 18 mile stretch from Downtown Los Angeles to Santa Monica. Developing a light rail line spanning that corridor would offer an alternative mode of transportation, ideally preventing some of the projected traffic increases.

Soon after publicly announcing their plans, the MTA began a community participation process to engage citizens in the development of the environmental impact report (EIR) for the project. Between 2000 and 2005, the MTA hosted over 100 community outreach meetings subsequent to public hearings in the communities impacted by the project (MTA, 2005). According to the MTA, community members raised the following as major concerns:

1. Public safety, especially in residential areas
2. Environmental issues, specifically noise and vibration during construction and after completion of the project
3. Traffic and parking impacts on neighborhoods surrounding stations

Community Concerns About Design & Safety

One of the primary concerns of South Los Angeles residents was that of the proposed light rail design and safety threats they believed it would pose to the community. While the train would travel below grade (under ground) through downtown, and above grade (above the street) in Culver City, the proposal indicated that the train would travel at-grade (level with the street) for the duration of the 4.5 miles of travel through South Los...
Angeles (www.fixexpo.org). Given the fact that the route for the light rail included residential areas with two local schools, Dorsey High School and Foshay Learning Complex, as well as churches and other community based organizations along the way, residents were concerned that the proposed project would create unsafe conditions for children, elderly and others in the community.

Differences in opinion as to whether or not the design was acceptable surfaced within the community. Elected officials expressed frustration with those who opposed the development of the Expo Line. South Los Angeles City Councilman Bernard Parks took a stand against residents who opposed the plan, contending that concerns about safety were tenuous, and the opposition an impediment to the development of the much needed light rail line (Goodmon, 2007).

A History of Neglect

A history of neglect on the part of the MTA to recognize and acknowledge the needs and concerns of the South Los Angeles community was also a key component in the controversy. This neglect is highlighted by the shortcomings of the Metro Blue Line, a light rail transit development that travels from Downtown Los Angeles to Long Beach via South Los Angeles. The Metro Blue Line is recognized as the most dangerous light rail system in the country, with over 900 accidents and 80 deaths occurring on the tracks as of the year 2007 (Goodmon, 2007). Regardless of the safety issues that it poses for the community, the Metro Blue Line is also one of the most highly utilized light rail transit lines in the nation (www.metro.net). Thus, while the MTA and proponents of public transportation view the Metro Blue Line as a great success, many of the concerns about the design of the Expo Line are rooted in South LA residents’ negative experiences with the unsafe conditions that the Metro Blue Line has imposed on their community.

INTERPRETATIONS

Despite their opposition to the proposal, South Los Angeles residents lost the battle to alter the design of the Expo Line. Construction of the first phase of the Expo Line using the at-grade design began in October 2006, and is scheduled to be complete by the summer of 2011 (www.rail.buildexpo.org). The question here is why? Given the legitimate concerns pertaining to safety, and the history of neglect, why did the residents ultimately lose the fight to change the proposed structure of the light rail transit line?

Justification for the development of the Expo Line is deeply rooted in the undeniable reality that there is great need for alternative modes of transportation throughout Los Angeles. Any reduction in the number of cars on the road is a bonus for all commuters in the region. Moreover, the justification for building a light rail transit line that is potentially unsafe for local residents is founded in the utilitarian principle of “greatest good for greatest number,” which alleges that if the benefits to more (in this case the region) outweigh the harms to few (in this case, the South LA community), then the project should move forward (Fainstein, 2006). Not to mention the ever-present struggle to develop more for less. Using these justifications as a base, the following sections will offer various interpretations that seek to explain why the MTA proceeded with the development of the Expo Line.
**Dialogue, Framing & Agenda-Setting**

In their discussion on dialogue as a community of inquiry, Innes and Booher argue that dialogue is at the core of collaborative rationality because through dialogue conflicting views and knowledge can be transformed into something rational and meaningful (2010). They describe varieties of dialogue that include policy dialogue where participants move from raw opinion to considered judgment through the use of observation dialogues that involve framing and reframing of issues, storytelling, role playing and bricolage (Innes & Booher, 2010). The authors argue that genuine dialogue can help address some of the challenges associated with framing the issue that often impede on efforts to collaborate. They also argue that reasoning within dialogue is accomplished through storytelling by participants that provides lenses through which reframing can occur until consensus is reached (Innes & Booher, 2010).

Considering this theory in light of the Expo Line, it is difficult to determine if this type of genuine dialogue occurred between the MTA and South LA residents. The fact that the MTA hosted over 100 public hearings and community outreach meetings throughout the communities that would be impacted by the light rail suggests that the organization may have attempted to create a space for genuine dialogue to take place. What is more, change did occur for some out of the dialogue and storytelling that took place within the community hearing and meetings. For example, elected officials and residents in Culver City refused to allow an at-grade transit line to be developed in their community. The Expo Line will pass through one mile of Culver City, and for that one mile, the light rail will be above grade rather than at-grade, as it will be in South LA (Goodmon, 2007).

The decision to change the design of the transit development in Culver City came through many meetings, discussions and storytelling. Interestingly, the same kinds of meetings, discussions and storytelling occurred in South LA, yet the result was not the same. Assuming that the community meetings held by the MTA allowed for genuine dialogue to take place in both Culver City and South LA, why is it that South LA residents did not receive the same outcome as residents in Culver City?

Schweitzer and Stephenson’s assessment of agenda-setting and framing in *Planning and the Environmental Media* provides more insight as to why this discrepancy in practice took place. They define agenda-setting as “framing problems and their solutions...in a manner that captures the attention of groups wielding social, political, economic, or cultural power so that the framing or issue becomes salient” (Schweitzer & Stephenson, 2). This understanding of agenda-setting as key to developing salience is essential to analyzing the case at hand. The MTA has a clear agenda, which is to expand regional transit and create alternative modes of transportation through the development of a “world class transportation system” for Los Angeles (www.metro.net). This noble agenda has been framed in the media for decades, and has convinced environmentalists, as well as proponents for the expansion of mass transit—people like me—that it is imperative that Los Angeles work quickly to improve and expand our public transportation system. Taking this concept one step further, this agenda and framing lends itself to another understanding, which is that anyone who opposes plans for the expansion of mass transit
are simply selfish, caring more about their individual comforts than the needs of society as a whole.

Schweitzer and Stephenson provide a simple explanation of how agenda-setting works. They state, “agenda-setting concerns not just the stories told, but what type of story is told, to whom those stories are told, and the strategic timing of when those stories are told” (2010, 4). Given its clearly defined agenda, it was not difficult for the MTA to frame the Expo Line issue in a way that painted a picture of the South LA residents as naysayers who were opposed to the development of regional transit. Framing the message in this way gave the public the impression that this opposition was a clear case of NIMBYism rather than a case of legitimate concern that warranted further review and consideration.

What is fascinating about the implications made through this framework is that even the MTA acknowledges that South LA residents constitute a large portion of those who utilize public transit. By MTA’s own definition, residents in South LA are “a transit-dependent population,” with 19% of the households in the study area, and 29% of the households within a half-mile radius of the Expo corridor having no car (MTA, 2005). These statistics indicate a clear need for increased public transit along the Expo corridor, and contradict the NIMBY framework that was put forward by the MTA.

Keeping this in mind, it is critical to understand that South LA residents were not opposed to the MTA’s plan for a light rail system. In fact, the residents and community-based organizations that spoke out against the proposed plan for the light rail repeatedly emphasized that they supported the development of public transit within their community, just not under the conditions that the MTA had proposed (www.fixexpo.org). This was not a “Not in My Backyard” case, which is why a distinction must be made here between NIMBYism and social control. South LA residents were not fighting the plan because they wanted to keep people out of their community. These residents’ concerns were very different than the typical NIMBY opposition. In fact, instead of trying to stop the development from happening, they presented the MTA with proposals to make the project better and safer for the community, thereby further indicating that their fight was not against the expansion of regional transit, but with the design and safety of this particular transit proposal (www.fixexpo.org). Nonetheless, those in power—in this case, the MTA—defined the story that was framed in the media. The MTA was able to control the story, making it difficult for genuine dialogue to take place around the issue.

Money, Power & Rationalization

South LA residents presented a very strong and rational case with valid reasons why an at-grade transit line was not good for their community or the region. However, despite the existence of evidence to the contrary (namely, the threats to safety posed by the Metro Blue line), the MTA maintained that the proposed design was safe, thus did not warrant changing. Furthermore, the MTA also argued that altering the design from an at-grade system to a subway structure would increase costs exorbitantly, which seemed wasteful and irrational since the at-grade system was safe. This in contrast to the $54 million worth of changes that were made to build an overpass in lieu of the originally proposed at-grade design in Culver City to appease the residents and elected leaders who raised similar
concerns to those raised by South LA residents (www.fixexpo.com). South LA residents perceived this difference in response on the part of the MTA as an injustice. It appeared that their concerns were ignored while the concerns raised by Culver City residents were legitimized by the MTA. This injustice was exacerbated by the fact that the MTA’s budget revealed spending $185 million of tax payer money for one mile of transit in Culver City, compared to $140 million total for 4.5 miles in South LA (Goodmon, 2007). How does the MTA rationalize this discrepancy?

Here, we look to Flyvbjerg to better understand this kind of irrational rationalization of actions taken by those in power. Flyvbjerg makes the case that “power, quite simply, often finds ignorance, deception, self-deception, rationalizations, and lies more useful for its purposes than truth and rationality” (1998, 322). This idea that power, and those in power, choose to rationalize that which works best in their favor sheds light on the rationalization of the MTA’s decision to alter the light rail design in Culver City, while refusing to do the same in South LA.

Historically, South LA residents have had little power to improve conditions in their community. According to South LA resident Brandi Linton, who lives across the street from Dorsey High School, and a few steps from the tracks where the Expo Line will be built, “although there are dozens of community-based organizations that want to change the power dynamics in the area, a history of neglect has left the community disenfranchised and without a voice” (Interview, 11/2010). What this means in the case of the Expo Line is that the South LA residents can demand change, but have little power to ensure that their demands are met. The MTA could move forward with the project with or without the support of South LA residents. Contrarily, residents in Culver City have more power, and their elected officials share their concerns. Had the MTA not adhered to their demands to elevate the light rail, it is likely that Culver City would have stopped the development from going through their community. So, the MTA did what was in its best interest, which was to save money by not altering the design in South LA, and to invest more in Culver City so that it could move forward with the project. It created its own rationality by deciding that the cost increase to alter the design for Culver City was worth the investment, but doing the same in South LA was not.

The treatment of the South LA resident opposition to the proposed plan offers an example of how recognizing injustice is overlooked, often completely ignored, when those in power choose to rationalize a decision, despite the negative impacts the decision might have on those with less power. Flyvbjerg offers “power defines what counts as rationality and knowledge, and thereby what counts as reality” (1998). The reality for the MTA is much different than the reality of South LA. The MTA has more power than South LA residents, which is why it was able to rationalize the decision to move forward with the at-grade design, despite the fact that it was not in the best interest of the community, and completely different than the decision that it determined to be in the best interest of Culver City and the region. Furthermore, the decision that the MTA made to maintain the at-grade design has determined what counts as reality for South LA, which from my interpretation, is that South LA is not as valuable or worthy in the eyes of the MTA as Culver City.
Forgiveness, Forgetting & Grace

Considering the MTA’s history of neglect and disregard for the South LA community, as evidenced by the poor outcomes and tragic accidents on the Metro Blue Line, a discussion on forgiveness and grace is paramount to this case.

As previously mentioned, the community’s primary concern was that the at-grade light rail would pass in close proximity to schools, churches, parks and homes. Their experience with accidents and deaths with the Metro Blue line through South LA offers legitimacy to their concerns and requests to alter the light rail’s design. It also reinforces the fact that these residents have not forgotten the losses that their community has suffered as a result of a poorly designed light rail system that the MTA assured would be safe and beneficial to the community (Schweitzer, Lecture 2010). The MTA appears to have no recollection of the broken promises it made to the residents of South LA when the Metro Blue line was built. If it in fact does recall these broken promises and outcomes, it appears that the MTA has bestowed “cheap grace” upon itself, thereby granting itself forgiveness for the hurt that it has caused the South LA community (Schweitzer, Draft).

Actions and decisions on the part of elected officials in South Los Angeles, whose constituents will be most directly impacted by the Expo Line, appear to have taken it upon themselves to offer forgiveness on behalf of the residents in their districts. An article by Damien Goodmon revealed that Councilmember Bernard Parks expressed his dissatisfaction with those who opposed the Expo Line plan as it was originally designed (2007). He preferred that the residents allow the MTA to move forward with the at-grade design without further opposition from the community. This kind of action to offer forgiveness and pressuring the victims to forgive and forget is in contrast with what Derrida believes to be acceptable in terms of forgiveness. Derrida argues that forgiveness is an act between two parties, the guilty and the victim. In his text On Forgiveness, he strongly states that public figures and institutions do not have the right to, nor should they attempt to grant forgiveness on behalf of victims (Derrida, 1997). Actions such as these imply to the guilty party that it is okay to move forward, hence a potential reason why the MTA has moved on.

The MTA could have chosen to hold off on development to seek more funding through federal grants and other means, so that it might develop a new design that included above grade and/or below grade options in South LA. While these alternatives would have required more time and money, it would have been a worthwhile investment if it meant a safer transit system for the community, and a chance at real grace and forgiveness for mistakes of the past. Instead, the MTA chose to ignore the pertinent issue of a desire for justice that underlined South LA residents’ fight to alter the Expo Line plans. As a result, the volatile relationship between the MTA and South LA may persist.

CONCLUSION

The complexity of this controversy is manifested through the poor framing of the issue in the media, the contradictory actions taken by the MTA (e.g. agreeing to build above grade in Culver City, but refusing to do the same in South LA), the dichotomous perspectives
between elected officials and residents as to whether or not an injustice exists, and the history of neglect on the part of the MTA.

There are so many lessons to be learned from this case, and each of the theories used to interpret the issue add value to the discussion around what happened here and how we can prevent controversies like this from reoccurring. When thinking about the goals of the MTA and its vision to expand transit, the interpretations of agenda-setting and framing, along with rationalization through power offer the most concrete explanations as to why this happened. This is because with a vision as vast as the one that the MTA has set forth, it is easy to see how anything or anyone that gets in the way becomes the bad guy in the situation. They can/will be framed as such, especially because the agenda of the MTA is a noble one that seeks to serve everyone. Keeping this in perspective, it is easy to rationalize poor decisions that may cause harm to some for the sake of the greater good. However, that does not make it right.

**Will History Repeat Itself?**

The first phase of the Expo Line is scheduled to open next year (2011). The question now is, will history repeat itself? Will the fears expressed by South LA residents become reality? Will the lives of school children, the elderly and other vulnerable members of society be threatened by the existence of the at-grade Expo Line in their community? While we can hope that the outcomes of the Expo Line will be drastically different from those that have been experienced with the Metro Blue Line, only time will tell...
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