

The Long Road to Permanent Funding

OPENING

Good morning, friends.

Today I want to talk about the money that built our trains and subways, and the people who fought for those trains for almost half a century. It is also a story about how a city keeps a promise to itself.

I speak as a citizen of the whole city. I have watched Los Angeles argue with itself for fifty years, and I still believe it can choose wisely.

Our rail system took three mayors to build: Tom Bradley, Antonio Villaraigosa, and Eric Garcetti, each with his own plan. Most of all, it was built by voters who agreed, again and again, to tax themselves for a future they might not live to ride.

I will tell the story in three parts. Keep one question in mind as I do:

does this decision increase dignity and security for those with the least power in Los Angeles, without scapegoating anyone?

PART ONE: TOM BRADLEY AND A TOUGH BEGINNING

Let us begin with some memories most Angelenos have lost.

From about 1890 to 1930, Los Angeles built one of the great streetcar systems in history: the Yellow Cars served the city's streets, and Henry Huntington's Red Cars ran on more than a thousand miles of track to Long Beach, Pasadena, Santa Monica, and San Bernardino. In the 1920s, the Pacific Electric was the largest electric railway system in the world, and then, one line at a time, Los Angeles let it go.

In 1925 – that's over a hundred years ago – Los Angeles opened its first subway, a tunnel of about a mile from Glendale and Beverly Boulevards to Fourth and Hill Streets. It was meant to be the first act of something great. The second act took more than half a century. In between, Los Angeles gave its heart to the automobile.

That was a choice: freeways over trains, the private car over the public good. Real change means making a different choice.

Tom Bradley, elected mayor in 1973, made transit a promise of his first campaign. A year later, a transit tax did well in the city and failed in the county. Bradley kept going. He looked for another road, and it ran through Washington.

The poet Robert Frost wrote about two roads that split in a yellow wood.
He ended with lines many American children learned in school:

"I took the one less traveled by / And that has made all the difference."

In a city in love with its freeways, rail was the road less traveled.
Tom Bradley took the road less travelled. And today, all over Los Angeles,
you can see the difference.

Washington had a fair rule. As Nate Holden, who would become a long-
time Los Angeles City Councilman liked to say,

"the federal government would pay to dig a hole only if the locals taxed
themselves first."

Here I want to honor Supervisor Kenneth Hahn. I have always compared
him to Archimedes, the ancient Greek engineer, who said,

"give me a place to stand and a lever, and I will move the world."

Kenny Hahn's lever was Proposition A. In November 1980, the voters of Los Angeles County approved a half-cent sales tax for transit, with about fifty-four percent of the vote. A quarter went back to local cities, forty percent to buses and lower fares, and thirty-five percent to rail. The bus rider and the small city each got a fair share. That balance is why it passed, and it survived a court challenge.

Then the fight moved to the neighborhoods and to Washington.

Hancock Park, Fairfax, and Beverly Hills all resisted. Some concerns were real. Some of the opposition carried an ugly fear of who might ride those trains. A public work that serves everyone tests whether a city believes that everyone belongs.

As president of the Southern California Rapid Transit District, I took more red-eye flights to Washington than I care to count, with allies in both parties, Republican Stuart Spencer and Democrat Mickey Kantor.

I remember one meeting in the West Wing with the President Ronald Reagan's budget director, David Stockman. He asked what we needed. I said, a Letter of Intent for the Los Angeles subway. He said,

"Is that all? I signed off on that."

I walked out believing we had secured hundreds of millions of dollars in twenty minutes. The next day, a reporter called. The budget director, she said, had misspoken.

I called Mayor Bradley with the bad news. He listened, and then he said,

"Nick, we'll march on. We'll keep going, and we'll get the subway."

That is what steadiness sounds like. I have never forgotten it.

The Administration then asked the private sector to share the burden. So we created Benefit Assessment Districts, asking commercial property owners near the new stations to help pay for them. They raised about one hundred thirty million dollars. Those who benefit most contribute most, and our state Supreme Court upheld it.

Then, in March of 1985, methane gas exploded beneath a department store in the Fairfax District. Congressman Henry Waxman, whose district the line would cross, used it to demand a halt to tunneling.

Independent experts found the project safe, but Waxman held firm. On the day of the House vote, with debate underway, I spread out my maps of the methane zones and found an escape route: bypass Fairfax. The compromise was accepted, and the House voted to fund Metro Rail.

I call it a Hail Mary pass, and it worked. It also had a price: years of delay, millions in wasted design work, and a beautiful station at the Hollywood Bowl that Frank Gehry had designed in the shape of a horn was cut. A wise citizen counts both the gains and the costs.

President Reagan called Metro Rail "a ton of fat" and asked Congress to take the money back. Congress refused. On September 29, 1986, we broke ground at First and Hill Streets, and Bradley called it a tribute to tenacity. A few months later, Reagan vetoed a highway bill carrying our subway funds, and Congress overrode him. The first segment opened in January 1993, and the Red Line reached North Hollywood in 2000.

Bradley taught us that a promise to the public is kept through years of patient, unglamorous persistence.

PART TWO: ANTONIO VILLARAIGOSA, THE SUBWAY TO THE SEA, AND MEASURE R

By the early 2000s, our rail system had stalled. The historian Kevin Starr compared it to a half-built medieval cathedral, interrupted by plague, famine, or war. Yet cathedrals, he reminded us, had a way of getting finished.

Antonio Villaraigosa kept that faith. Running for mayor in 2005, he gave the city a vision: the subway to the sea. He asked me to draw a map of it, and an editor said it looked like a Van Gogh. I took that as a compliment.

The first obstacle was Waxman's old ban on tunneling under Wilshire Boulevard. Villaraigosa invited the Congressman in. A panel of tunneling experts studied the corridor and found the subway could be built safely. And then something remarkable happened: Henry Waxman changed his mind. He introduced a bill to lift the ban he had once written, and at the end of 2007 President Bush signed it into law.

We should celebrate leaders who change their minds when the evidence changes. That takes courage. And it shows the value of giving an opponent an honorable path to "yes."

The second obstacle was money.

Polling showed voters would accept only a sales tax. Then came a coalition. Denny Zane, a former mayor of Santa Monica, founded the organization "Move LA" to bring business, labor, and environmental leaders to one table. Thirty-five organizations were invited to the first meeting, and thirty-four came. Assemblyman Mike Feuer carried the bill in Sacramento and kept it free of pet projects.

Then, just weeks before the 2008 election, the economy collapsed. Banks failed. Everyone assumed a tax increase was doomed.

Villaraigosa kept the faith. He raised the money and led the campaign, and he made a wise choice: he stayed out of its advertising, even with his own reelection near. The measure belonged to the voters.

On November 4, 2008, more than two-thirds of Los Angeles County voters said yes to Measure R: a half-cent sales tax for thirty years, raising about forty billion dollars. In the middle of a financial panic, people with every reason to be afraid chose to invest in their children's city.

The Beatles had a song for a road like that: "The Long and Winding Road." Our long and winding road wound through Washington, through Sacramento, through a methane scare and a market crash. And on that election night in 2008, it finally led us home.

There was one more lesson, a lesson in humility. In 2012, leaders tried to extend Measure R to sixty years, so that thirty years of projects might be built in ten. Measure J won more than sixty-six percent of the vote, and it still fell short of two-thirds, by just a sliver. Voters wanted transit, and they wanted every part of the county to see itself in the plan. That lesson made the next victory possible.

PART THREE: ERIC GARCETTI, MEASURE M, AND FUNDING WITHOUT SUNSET

Eric Garcetti became mayor in 2013, and in his second month in office he began planning a new countywide measure.

His instinct was regional. He brought together mayors from the county's eighty-eight cities at City Hall and asked them directly: would you support another transportation measure? Almost every hand went up.

Then came two years of listening. Metro worked with every part of the county to give each one something real. Move LA widened its coalition to seniors, people with disabilities, students, and environmental justice advocates. Garcetti traveled to every region and promised to deliver for every community. Some opponents became neutral, and some became supporters. That is how a coalition is built: by including people.

Then came the biggest decision of all. The campaign's research found that voters did not want a sunset, a time limit on the tax. They wanted Los Angeles to finish the job.

In November 2016, Measure M passed with more than seventy-one percent of the vote. It added another half-cent sales tax with no expiration, and it made Measure R permanent as well. Together they are expected to raise about one hundred sixty billion dollars through 2057 and beyond. With Propositions A and C, Los Angeles County now has permanent funding for its transportation future.

That year, a new generation of voters came forward: Latino, Asian American, and young. They welcomed public investment.

Walt Whitman, the great poet of American democracy, wrote:

"Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road."

That was the spirit of 2016. No more sunsets. No more waiting for the next fight. The road was finally open, and it was open to everyone.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

So what does this long story teach us?

First, great public works are built on fairness. Proposition A balanced buses and rail. The benefit districts asked those who gained most to give most. Measure M gave every corner of the county a stake. When the burden is shared justly, voters say yes.

Second, courage often looks like persistence. Bradley's "we'll march on." Villaraigosa keeping faith through a financial crisis. Garcetti knocking on the doors of eighty-eight cities.

Third, give your opponents an honorable path to yes.

And fourth, tell the truth. Be honest about limits, deliver what you promise, and admit it when you fall short. That is how trust is earned.

Now let me return to the question I asked you to remember. Does this increase dignity and security for those with the least power in Los Angeles?

The worker in Boyle Heights who needs to reach a job on the Westside. The student in the Valley who cannot afford a car. The grandmother in South Los Angeles who wants to take her grandchildren to the beach in Santa Monica. This system must work for them.

The money is now permanent. Our task now is to build wisely, fairly, and well, so the trains serve everyone. That task belongs to all of us, as citizens of the whole city.

Let me leave you with a poem close to my Greek heart. Constantine Cavafy wrote "Ithaka," about the long voyage home of Odysseus. Let me say it first in Greek.

Σα βγεις στον πηγαιμό για την Ιθάκη,
να εύχεται να 'ναι μακρύς ο δρόμος,
γεμάτος περιπέτειες, γεμάτος γνώσεις.
Η Ιθάκη σ' έδωσε τ' ωραίο ταξίδι.

And now in English:

When you set out on the journey to Ithaka,
pray that the road is long,
full of adventures, full of knowledge.
Ithaka gave you the beautiful journey.

Our road to Metro Rail was long. It took more than forty years and more red-eye flights than I can count. And look where it brought us. Today, trains run from North Hollywood to downtown, from Pomona to Long Beach, and light rail goes all the way to the sea at Santa Monica. Children who were not yet born when we broke ground now ride to school, to work, and to the beach.

That is our Ithaka. And what a journey it was.

Thank you.

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