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Villaraigosa wants transit projects on the fast track

The mayor envisions completion in 10 years instead of 30 and makes rail his top priority. His plan would need at least \$10 billion in additional funds.

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Graphic: Fast-tracking rail projects

By Ari B. Bloomekatz
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If Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has his way, Los Angeles County will soon embark on a commuter rail building boom the likes of which the region has never seen.

The mayor today will unveil an ambitious but politically risky transportation plan that fast-tracks several high-profile rail projects to be completed within the next decade. That's a big speed-up, because officials have generally been talking about completing them within 30 years.

Villaraigosa has made building more rail a priority of his administration, though he's the first to admit it's going to take more than speeches and good intentions to get it done.

"Yes, this is a stretch goal. Yes, this is going to be tough, but I think by now folks shouldn't count me out," Villaraigosa said in an interview. "The fact is that this is the most important thing that we can do to alleviate congestion and gridlock, to improve the quality of our air and to really vindicate the people's will for the need to address transportation."

The mayor scored a victory last year when voters approved a measure to help fund the projects, which include a subway to the Westside, the extension of the Gold Line in the San Gabriel

Valley, the extension of the Expo Line to Santa Monica and new rail lines along Crenshaw Boulevard and through downtown L.A.

The mayor's office estimates that the revenue from Measure R and other available funds would provide only an estimated \$5.2 billion if they were to expedite the projects. The rest would have to come from private-sector partners, the federal government or other public funding.

Villaraigosa has made it clear he thinks the Westside subway -- by far the most expensive project with a price tag of \$5 billion to \$6 billion -- is his top priority.

That has sparked conflict, with backers of other rail projects demanding that their lines be given equal consideration. By fast-tracking projects across the region, the mayor could ease those concerns, but only if enough money is available.

And that remains an open question.

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The mayor's office says the county needs at least \$10 billion in additional funds to complete the projects -- including the subway, the Crenshaw line and the rail extension to Los Angeles International Airport, among others -- in 10 years.

The first step, he said, is building a regional coalition to promote the projects. Then comes the hard part: finding funding, whether in the form of public-private partnerships or money from the federal government in the form of a no-interest loan, among other possibilities, the mayor's office said.

Villaraigosa said he believes that the federal government will be more likely to give Los Angeles money for the projects than other cities because of the passage of Measure R.

He also thinks it will be an attractive fast-track option because, during tough economic times, it would create thousands of jobs much faster than originally planned.

Art Leahy, Metro chief executive, said that, hypothetically, if there were sufficient funding, the MTA would be able to accelerate projects and that it may be cheaper to expedite projects now because "we're in a period of relatively low construction costs."

Villaraigosa will discuss the plan for the first time today at the Los Angeles Business Council's 2009 Mayoral Housing, Transportation and Jobs Summit at UCLA. He said he will tell the group that "30 years is too long" to wait and that all 12 transit projects he wants to expedite can be built in a decade. It's called the "30/10" plan and he will joke that some might say he's "coming up with another dream."

"The projects are going to happen, there's no question about that, and I'm going to be very aggressive at getting federal funds. . . . My goal is to make it happen sooner rather than later," Villaraigosa said. "I recognize that it's a daunting task, but I love the challenge and I'm up for it."

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