



City slugfest: L.A.'s 'Subway to the Sea' runs aground in Beverly Hills

Citing safety concerns but eliciting charges of hysteria, wealthy Beverly Hills reportedly has spent \$2 million to block plans for a subway that would pass underneath its high school.

By Daniel B. Wood, Staff writer JULY 19, 2012



AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes

Beverly Hills, Calif. — [Los Angeles](#), America's city of cars, is experiencing a roadblock over a subway line.

A key section of the subway – known originally by its romantic marketing term, “Subway to the Sea,” but now by the more mundane “West Side subway extension” or “Purple Line” because it never really reaches the ocean – is being held up with a lawsuit by Beverly Hills.

Because the track is slated to pass 70 ft. beneath the 1927-built, [Beverly Hills High School](#) – which itself was built on active oilfields – the tony zip-code is spending millions to fight the project for reasons, it says, of safety.

“Methane gas, toxic chemicals and teenagers don't mix,” says the opening line of a PTA-produced video, which blends computer-generated images of exploding fireballs with newsreel footage of an actual methane fire that ignited nearby in 1985 and burned two city blocks for five days.

“But this dangerous combination is on the verge of exploding at Beverly High, turning the school into a mega-disaster.”

The city of [Beverly Hills](#), which reportedly has spent \$2 million in legal and public relations fees, filed suit last month to force the Los Angeles County [Metropolitan Transportation Authority \(MTA\)](#) to reroute the link 1,000 ft. away, eliminating the need for a tunnel.

The MTA says it has ruled out the alternative route because it would attract fewer riders and is dangerously close to an active earthquake fault, and subway backers are denouncing the Beverly Hills campaign.

“The insanity that has engulfed this city for the last year and a half, [is] the result of this hysterical campaign being run about explosions and migrating methane gas, that were designed to inflame and alarm the public,” L.A. County Supervisor, [Zev Yaroslavsky](#), said to [The New York Times](#).

Advocates of the tunnel route say Beverly Hills is just full of rich people used to getting their own way, citing a fierce political battle in the 1960s in which the city blocked a 10-lane freeway link that would have connected nearby skyscrapers in Century City to Los Angeles.

Opponents of the tunnel, meanwhile, are saying, “follow the money,” pointing to investigative reports that have traced the influence of developers that stand to benefit from the project. One such developer, [Chicago-based JMB Realty Corporation](#), raised nearly \$300,000 for Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who heads the MTA.

According to an investigative cover story in Los Angeles Weekly, the sub-school tunnel would enable the project to run “almost to the lobbies” of two high rises built by JMB, with a third, just a half-block away.

According to the PTA-created video, the Beverly Hills Unified School District is happy to support an alternate route that would avoid the entire problem, and require transit users to walk perhaps two-and-a-half minutes.

Mayor Villaraigosa – who is rumored to be interested in becoming US secretary of transportation if Obama is reelected – says the project is part of his vision to ease the region’s stultifying traffic congestion, and says residents are just creating a climate of fear.

There are other snarls as well.

In 2008, Beverly Hills approved \$334 million in bonds to help the school district modernize and renovate the high school, which won a National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence Award by the US Department of Education in 2004. School officials say the Metro project could seriously hamper plans to build new buildings and drive up construction costs by untold millions.

Both the city of Beverly Hills and the school district have filed separate California Environmental Quality Act lawsuits challenging the subway route under the high school. This should be resolved, after appeals, in about 20 months.

Lewis Hall, a recently elected board member of the Beverly Hills Unified School District, says the school district is discounting MTA's claim that the alternative route would put the subway and the subway station on an active fault. “We claim the evidence is flawed and we have produced our own evidence showing that MTA's science is wrong,” Hall says.

“If MTA won't seriously consider the seismic studies submitted by Beverly Hills, showing the alternative route as safe, hopefully a judge will,” he says.

The Los Angeles Times has weighed in with two editorials, both supporting the under-the-school tunnel.

One reads: “The Westside needs the ‘Subway to the Sea,’ and the NIMBYs of B.H. should get on board.”

The other says, “Opponents of the planned route under Beverly Hills High are wasting time and money.”