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The mystery of the Green Line

By Gene Maddaus, Staff Writer

Standing as a testament to government dysfunction, the Green Line light-rail line stops two miles short of LAX.

From the platform at the Aviation Station, passengers can see the track heading toward the planes in the foggy distance, but stopping abruptly in a nearby parking lot.

How could Los Angeles transportation officials have spent \$700 million to build the Green Line, which runs 20 miles between Norwalk and Redondo Beach, while dodging the nation's third-busiest airport along the way?

In the dozen years since the Green Line opened, cities like San Francisco, New York and Portland have built rail lines directly to their airports.

Meanwhile, efforts to complete a two-mile spur to Los Angeles International Airport have stalled for lack of funding, making the original decision to avoid the airport all the more frustrating and baffling.

"Most people look at government and they think it's a conspiracy. It's so hard to believe it's as inept as it is," said Ruth Galanter, a former Los Angeles city councilwoman whose district included the airport. "I used to believe in conspiracies, until I discovered incompetence."

The culprits cited most often by conspiracy theorists are the taxi drivers. How could they get away with charging \$50 fares if travelers could pay a few bucks and hop on light-rail instead?

This theory explains a boondoggle in terms of a recognizable human motive: greed.

But Mitch Rouse, who owned SuperShuttle and several cab companies at the time the Green Line was being built, says he would have welcomed an LAX stop.

"Anything that gets people out of their cars benefits the taxi industry," Rouse said. "Some would take rail into the airport and then not want to wait in line when they got back and jump in a cab."

And while he was a donor to various political campaigns, Rouse said he didn't have the clout to sway the officials deciding the Green Line route.

"I should be flattered that somebody would think I'd have that much power," he said. "But, alas, such is not the case."

Others involved in the planning of the line confirm the taxi industry played no role in bypassing the airport. Which brings the theorists to the second potential culprit: Los Angeles World Airports, the city entity that owns and operates LAX and had the power to block the rail line.

And, arguably, it also had a motive since the airport draws much of its revenue from parking fees.

But LAWA officials say that wasn't a concern since rail would have had a relatively trivial effect on parking fees compared with other opportunities for growth.

"Transit isn't going to have a significant impact on our revenue," said Mike Doucette, chief of airport planning. "We'd prefer to see it. If there was a great regional transit system that fed the airport, that helps us."

Asked to respond to the conspiracy theories, Doucette said, "They all came from the grassy knoll."

The actual explanation for the route is much more complicated.

The first thing to understand is that the Green Line was not built on its own merits, but as a condition for the construction of the Century Freeway.

Planning started in the 1970s, with the thought that the 105 Freeway could relieve traffic congestion along Century, Manchester, and Firestone boulevards and Imperial Highway. But there was fierce opposition from the community because the project would destroy homes and slice up neighborhoods, many of them housing low-income residents.

Lawsuits were filed, resulting in a 1979 federal consent decree that allowed transportation officials to move forward with the project. However, they had to provide affordable housing near the freeway, along with a mass-transit line that would be built along the freeway median to minimize its disruption to the community.

The Los Angeles County Transportation Commission, the precursor to today's Metropolitan Transportation Authority, began the process of planning the route.

At the western end of the Century Freeway, the line could either go north to LAX, which employed about 35,000 people, or south to El Segundo, home to about 90,000 aerospace workers.

"It was a clear decision it would be better to go into the El Segundo employment area," said Richard Stanger, who was the commission's director of rail planning. "The models and everything indicated it was much better to go into El Segundo and focus on the needs of the everyday worker."

But the models could not predict the collapse of the Soviet Union and, with it, the aerospace industry. By 1993, El Segundo had lost 45,000 jobs.

By that point, however, construction of the Green Line was well under way.

So transportation planners studied ways to build a "northern extension" connecting the Green Line to LAX. However, the concept was beset by problems, most of which still exist.

At the time, LAWA was working on a modernization plan that included a "people mover" - a monorail that would serve all the terminals and deposit passengers at an off-site location. Clearly, the train should go there - but where would that be?

(Fifteen years later, the modernization plan is progressing, with improvements to runways and separate terminals. However, the off-site element has been taken off the table.)

The Federal Aviation Administration also worried that a rail line would interfere with navigational equipment at the end of the runways and that overhead electric wires would intrude into flight paths. To solve that issue, the line would likely have to go underground, greatly increasing its cost.

Although LAWA officially supported the Green Line link, the transit panel felt the support didn't go very deep. Members speculated that LAWA didn't want to give the county control over its property, didn't think people would use the train or believed the project was simply a pipe dream.

Whatever the case, the Transportation Commission didn't press the matter very hard.

"We had a pocketful of money and communities that wanted rail, and we wanted to make rail real," recalls Jacki Bacharach, then chairwoman of the LACTC's rail planning committee.

"Part of what we were saying was, 'OK, let's do it, let's show people we mean business.' So if we didn't get cooperation pretty fast, we closed up the end of the line and said let's use the money where we can use it."

When facts were faced, it didn't look good for the Green Line extension to the airport: Other projects had a higher priority, there was no legal requirement to take the line to LAX, there were significant planning and engineering hurdles, and money was short. The "northern extension" was dropped from the MTA's plan.

When the Green Line opened along the Century Freeway route in 1995, It was immediately tagged the "train to nowhere."

It was the least-used train in the MTA light-rail system until 2003, when the Gold Line opened and fared even worse.

MTA set up a free shuttle between the Aviation station and LAX, but it's used by just .3 percent of LAX passengers, officials say. The shuttle is used primarily by LAX employees, who now number about 54,000 - enough to rival the El Segundo employment area.

As things now stand, the best near-term prospects to connect the Green Line and the airport would be to build a people-mover between LAX to the Aviation station - a plan proposed earlier this decade and then shelved - or a light-rail system from Crenshaw that would connect with the Green Line at Aviation and would require an LAX people-mover at Century Boulevard.

Though that project is at the earliest planning stages, it has dedicated funding and would also provide a more direct route to downtown Los Angeles than the Green Line offers.

As for the long-term prospects, a coalition of elected leaders and transit advocates are still working to extend the Green Line to the airport and beyond - perhaps as far up the coast as Marina del Rey. Assemblyman Ted Lieu offered a bill this session that would create a Green Line construction authority, but it was defeated.

Ken Alpern, who co-chairs Friends of the Green Line, says there's some cause for optimism since LAX officials are cooperating with politicians and transportation planners. They see an emerging consensus, and hope that means there will be a second chance to cash in on a huge missed opportunity.

"The history of this is so sordid," Alpern said. "But the future of this looks so promising."