



# NEWS

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## **HEY HONEY, THE KID NEXT DOOR IS BUILDING THE EAST L.A. SUBWAY! METRO RED LINE PROJECT MANAGER SEES IT AS CHANCE OF A LIFETIME**

As a boy growing up in East L.A., Alfonso Rodriguez had two passions: one was taking things apart, the other playing goal keeper for the soccer team - training grounds, as it turned out, for one pressure-cooker of a career in railway construction.

"I was always tinkering with stuff, " says the 35-year-old project manager of the \$1.05 billion Metro Red Line Eastside Extension, which is now gearing up for construction. "I once took the dryer apart just because I wanted to see how it worked."

And then there's that other passion. Guarding the nets and preserving those 1-0 victories are still a source of inspiration to Alfonso, who as a boy lived on Ferris Street at Whittier Boulevard, close to where the subway will one day pass. Instead of intercepting intended goals, today he's more concerned with heading off each and every possible problem on the Eastside construction project before it occurs. And just like playing goal keeper, Alfonso knows the margin of error in this game is zero, rules he intends to thrive under.

"We know we are under a microscope," says Alfonso, whose team includes nearly 200 MTA employees. "That's why we're going to make sure things get done right on the Eastside."

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Alfonso will focus on Phase One of the Eastside extension, expected to be finished by the year 2004. The 3.7-mile project includes four subway stations designed with cultural themes and will extend from Union Station to First and Lorena streets. In between, there will be stops at the Little Tokyo Arts District, First Street and Boyle Avenue and Cesar Chavez Boulevard and Soto Street. By the year 2010 daily ridership is expected to climb to nearly 30,000 passengers. When all is said and done, over 1 million cubic yards of dirt will be excavated and over 235,000 cubic yards of concrete poured.

"The subway affords the people of East Los Angeles an array of opportunities and will provide a first-class transportation system," says Alfonso, who now lives in Chino Hills with his wife Dee Dee and two children, Kaitlin and Daniel (a third is on the way). "For instance, many residents will find it much easier to seek and commute to jobs, as well as attend school, outside the area. In a way, the subway will erase an imaginary boundary line that has prevented people from getting ahead simply because they didn't have the ways and means of traveling to a certain destination.

"Children especially will find riding the subway an exciting experience... but it's much more than a Disneyland E-ticket ride, it's actually going to serve the public's needs for mobility and connect them to the Metro Blue and Green lines, Metrolink, Amtrak and buses traveling all over Los Angeles County and beyond."

Overseeing the construction of public works projects in residential areas is nothing new to Alfonso, a civil engineer graduate of Cal Poly San Luis Obispo. He came to the MTA last April with a track record of building projects on time, within budget and in a manner communities find acceptable.

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"That is my highest priority and, hopefully, the community will recognize it," he says.

Unlike the first three Metro Red Line segments, a significant portion of the tunneling on this project will take place directly under residential and commercial buildings, nearly 250 in all. And, although public apprehension in Boyle Heights and East L.A. is high, Alfonso says the design approach and technology to be used reflects this higher challenge.

And because the project is to be constructed in the neighborhood of his early childhood, Alfonso expresses a great deal of pride.

"My parents, who are incredibly excited about this project, always knew I was either going to be an architect or engineer because I was always playing with Super City, a high-rise building set," says Alfonso,

"The fact that I get to build this project closes the loop," he added. "This is really where I started dreaming of what I wanted to do when I grew up. Personally, I'm proud and gratified that this is my project. I would much rather work on the Metro Red Line Eastside Extension than other projects because, my God, I grew up here...it's hard to describe the feeling of connection."

Parental support is one thing, but how about some of the 400,000 people who live within one-quarter mile of four planned subway stations. Does Alfonso have any more credibility than say, an outsider? Should the residents on the Eastside put aside their concerns about subway construction.

Not according to a few of the patrons lunching at Ana's Original Mexican Food on First Street who listened intently as the blue-jeans clad, always beaming Alfonso spontaneously dropped by to share the latest in subway news with them.

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"It really doesn't matter that he's from East L.A.," said Ana Falcon, the restaurant's owner. "Just because he's from here doesn't mean I automatically have confidence in him. But, if he continues to come around like this, it would really be something."

Customer Ray Bretado, a teacher at Blessed Sacrament in Hollywood, echoed that sentiment. "I prefer to take a wait-and-see-approach. I say, 'show me first.' If in fact he really cares about the community it will make a difference. And he should care more about the community he's from. If I were him, I would find out what the people want instead of just telling us."

Listening to what people want is the approach Alfonso has adopted since joining the MTA in April - he has attended 15 community meetings thus far and will continue doing so until the project is completed in the year 2004, and makes it his business to return every phone call. Yet he is the first to admit it will take much more than being from East L.A. and a great attitude to win over the people's confidence.

"I believe people know I really care about this community based on our conversations," he said. "But clearly, just the fact I was born here is not enough. It does help because the MTA is perceived by some as being insensitive to community needs. I do know when it comes to East L.A. however, we've made an incredible effort to make sure the community is always informed. We've taken the necessary steps to ensure this segment runs smoothly. For instance, we're spending nearly twice as much on proven, state-of-the-art tunnel boring machines and will use a different tunneling technique than other Metro Rail segments to significantly lower the risk of a sinkhole or settlement from occurring."

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"I love the people of East L.A., they're incredibly friendly, and the entire MTA team recognizes that. Whenever I visit with merchants I have images of shopping on Whittier Boulevard as a little boy with my grandmother."

And then there are the detractors who say he is too wet behind the ears to be handling a public works project of this magnitude - one of the largest in the country - criticisms he has all heard before.

"At my last job I was the youngest VP in that company's history. Before that I was the youngest city engineer at the City of Rosemead, so I've always gotten that attitude," Alfonso says. "As a result I've always had to prove myself, which is a neat kind of challenge. That's how I felt when I first came to the MTA but after a while people could see what I could do and why I was hired.

"I just know when this project is done it's going to be beautiful. And when it's finished I'll be able to say I had a part in it."

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