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Waxman Bill to Repeal Subway Funding Restriction Passes U.S. House

- Boxer, Feinstein file companion measure in the Senate
- If signed into law, the legislation would permit extension of the subway past Wilshire/Western

(Feb. 7, 2007) The U.S. House of Representatives passed legislation, Wednesday, to repeal the 20-year-old prohibition on federal funding for subway tunneling in the Wilshire Corridor.

Speaking on the floor of the House, Congressman Henry Waxman, who sponsored the measure – H.R. 238 – said he had been assured that “it is technically feasible to handle the tunneling in a very safe manner....”

Citing safety concerns following an 1985 explosion and fire at the Ross Dress for Less store in the Wilshire/Fairfax district, Waxman sponsored legislative language in 1986 that prevented federal funding for further subway construction along Wilshire.

House Transportation Committee Chairman James Oberstar (D-Minn.) urged passage of H.R. 238 on Wednesday, noting that a process had been put into place “...by which the tunneling can continue in all safety to those doing the tunneling and to those above ground.”

The measure was passed on a 2/3rds voice vote by members of the House.

On Tuesday, U.S. Senators Barbara Boxer and Diane Feinstein filed legislation in the Senate as a companion to Waxman’s bill. If the bills are successful in both chambers, the legislation will go to the President for signature before becoming law.

Funds for subway extension

That would permit the use of federal funds to extend the subway past Wilshire/Western – an action the Metro Board has strongly supported and Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa has called “the subway to the sea.”

Statement from CEO Roger Snoble:

“Metro welcomes House passage of Congressman Henry Waxman’s bill. We are glad the House voted to repeal a longstanding prohibition on the use of federal funds for subway tunneling in Los Angeles. A world-class panel of independent experts agreed in November 2005 that Metro can tunnel safely along the Wilshire Corridor. Today’s vote in Congress affirms the findings of this panel and opens the possibility of securing federal money to extend our subway westward to help alleviate the area’s crushing traffic congestion.”

"Today is a good day for Los Angeles," Boxer said following filing of the Senate bill. "This subway project is another important step to decreasing congestion in Los Angeles. We've been told this project can be done safely, so it's time to move forward."

"Severe gridlock is a reality faced by millions of residents in Los Angeles every day," said Feinstein. "But plans to expand the city's Metro Red Line and to offer direct connections from Downtown Los Angeles to the Pacific Ocean were delayed for more than 20 years because of serious safety concerns. Experts have now assured us that tunneling technologies have improved sufficiently to allay those concerns. It's time to make this project a reality."

Waxman included the original language restricting federal funding for subway construction in the 1986 Department of Transportation Appropriations Act following the Ross Dress for Less explosion and fire.

Investigators later found that methane gas seeping into an auxiliary room of the store had caused the explosion, which blew out windows and partially collapsed the building's roof. At least 21 people were injured in the blast, two critically burned.

In 2005, Waxman worked with Villaraigosa to appoint a five-member panel of independent tunneling experts to review the subway tunneling proposal.

In November 2005, the panel reported that tunneling along Wilshire and operation of subway trains west of Western Avenue could be done safely using new tunneling technology.