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Three Decades Before Porter Ranch, a Methane Explosion Derailed L.A.'s Subway Plans

By Nathan Masters

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A 1985 methane explosion in L.A.'s Fairfax district turned a Ross Dress for Less into a disaster scene. Photo by Dean Musgrove, courtesy of the Herald-Examiner Collection - Los Angeles Public Library.

[Ancient forces lurk](#) beneath the paved surfaces of Los Angeles - powerful natural processes that, when touched by humanity and its creations, threaten public safety.

Not even a disaster on the scale of the Porter Ranch leak, which pumped 80,000 metric

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Methane from a mysterious underground source had silently been seeping into the basement of the Ross Dress for Less in L.A.'s Fairfax District when, on the afternoon of March 24, 1985, an employee punched his timesheet in an adjoining room, emitting a spark and igniting the pool of odorless gas. The ensuing explosion launched the store's roof into the sky. It blew out the windows. It twisted the discount clothing racks into pieces of flying shrapnel. Horrified and bloodied shoppers ran outside, only to find themselves surrounded by an even more hellish landscape: the ground itself was on fire, as flames licked up from cracks in the concrete. No one died, but in all 23 people were hospitalized.

In the aftermath, it was clear that the paved and mostly impermeable surfaces of the modern city had trapped the explosive methane, allowing it to pool in dangerous quantities, but in the months and then years that followed, [investigators could not agree on the gas's origins](#). The Ross Dress for Less sat atop the old [Salt Lake oil field](#), and one theory suggested that gas had escaped from the depths by way of an improperly capped well. Another looked to a shallower source: the decay of organic matter in the underlying soil. Yet another pointed to the role of small faults opened up in historic times by hydraulic fracturing.

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After the explosion, a drill probed the ground beneath the Ross in search of methane gas pockets. Photo by Mike Sergieff, courtesy of the Herald-Examiner Collection - Los Angeles Public Library.

Amid the scientific uncertainty, a political resolution emerged.

Beneath the Fairfax district lay not only methane pockets and ancient oil reservoirs, but also [the proposed route of the Metro Rail subway](#). Plans approved in the early 1980s showed the rapid-transit line tunneling beneath Wilshire Boulevard between downtown and the Fairfax district, then turning north toward West Hollywood - a route that made sense as a transit corridor between major job and population centers, but which residents of surrounding neighborhoods bitterly opposed for [a host of controversial reasons](#).

Their elected representatives, led by U.S. Rep. Henry Waxman, seized on the explosion as another rationale against the project. Biblical imagery of a land on fire was all they needed to derail an already-controversial project. By the end of 1985, officials had re-

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Dress for Less explosion remains a powerful reminder of the natural forces hidden deep beneath the city's pavement.

Before the Ross explosion, the Metro Rail subway was to travel directly through the Fairfax district and its methane fields. Courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive.

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Further Reading

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