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From the Los Angeles Times

Safety issues could delay Exposition Line

The state Public Utilities Commission raises concerns about vehicle and pedestrian crossings along the Exposition Line in Los Angeles.

By Jeffrey L. Rabin
Times Staff Writer

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While debate simmers over whether the last segment of the Exposition light-rail line should run through upscale Westside neighborhoods, safety concerns raised by state officials and others threaten to delay the first phase of the \$640-million project from downtown Los Angeles to Culver City.

Ground has been broken, contracts have been awarded and construction is getting underway on the nine-mile first phase, which is scheduled for completion in 2010. But the state agency that oversees rail safety in California is concerned that the trains may pose a risk to pedestrians and motorists at several locations.

Until additional safety precautions are incorporated into the project's design, the California Public Utilities Commission and the agency building the line remain at odds over 13 intersections near Los Angeles Trade Tech College, USC and Dorsey High School in the Crenshaw district.

"The commission's jurisdiction ... does not include whether to build a transit line. All we are concerned with is the safety of the proposed rail line," said Patrick S. Berdge, the commission attorney.

Several residents along the former railroad right of way are formally protesting the Exposition Metro Line Construction Authority's applications to put rails across 44 intersections along the route. In addition, a USC engineering professor and Los Angeles Unified School district officials have voiced safety concerns.

Builders of the rail line fear the issues raised by the utilities commission staff and others could delay construction for years and add millions of dollars to the project's cost. So they are fighting back, pushing legislation in Sacramento to cut in half the amount of time the commission has to act on the grade-crossing applications.

"We've still got a lot of folks talking about what we should do with this project," said Rick Thorpe, chief executive of the construction authority. "That discussion should have been done a long time ago.... When do you draw the line and say, 'We're done. Let's go build it.' "

Over the last three decades, Thorpe has built light-rail lines in San Diego, Salt Lake City and Los Angeles. "I won't allow any design ... that I don't think is absolutely safe to the public," he said.

Others aren't so sure. Najmedin Meshkati, a USC engineering professor, warns that fast-moving trains on the Exposition Line will pose a danger to "sensitive and vulnerable populations such as schoolchildren and elderly pedestrians."

Meshkati and graduate students in engineering at USC and Cal State Long Beach examined safety problems on the Metro Blue Line, which runs 22 miles from downtown Los Angeles to Long Beach.

A total of 87 people have been killed by Blue Line trains since the Metropolitan Transportation Authority opened the heavily traveled light-rail route in 1990. Twenty of those fatalities were ruled to be suicides.

The latest fatality occurred Saturday, when a 24-year-old woman ran across the tracks on Washington Boulevard, south of downtown Los Angeles, and was struck by a train, according to Abdul Zohbi, the MTA's manager of system safety.

Based on accident data, Meshkati and his team found that at-grade rail crossings posed a high risk to pedestrians and motorists. To reduce those risks significantly, Meshkati said, human factors need to play a vital role in the design of rail crossings on the Exposition Line.

Meshkati said the MTA's grade-crossing policy, which guides the agency's decisions about whether to place a rail line over or under a street, needs "a great deal of improvement."

But Zohbi said lessons learned from accidents on the Blue Line were incorporated into the design of the Metro Gold Line, which runs from downtown Los Angeles to Pasadena. The 13-mile rail line has had just one fatality, a suicide, and no serious injuries since operations began in 2003.

Zohbi said engineering improvements, enforcement of traffic laws and education of residents and schoolchildren have made both the Blue and Gold lines safer.

To prevent motorists from driving around gates, the Gold Line was built with gates that cover all traffic lanes on both sides of the tracks. Other gates block pedestrians from crossing the tracks when a train is approaching.

The same methods will be used on the Exposition Line. "We are basically sealing off the intersections entirely," Thorpe said.

But the Public Utilities Commission's rail safety staff remains concerned about the potential risk to drivers and pedestrians where the Exposition Line will pass Los Angeles Trade Tech College, just south of the Santa Monica Freeway.

Eight driveways lead into or out of the campus in four blocks of Flower Street between Washington Boulevard and 23rd Street. The Public Utilities Commission and the Exposition construction authority have been unable to reach agreement about how to design those crossings.

Four pedestrian crossings near USC, where the tracks will run in the median of Exposition Boulevard, are also a concern.

In the Crenshaw district, there is disagreement over what to do about the rail crossing nearest Dorsey High School.

At a recent meeting, County Supervisor Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, chairwoman of the Exposition construction authority, said she was concerned about the potential risk that the trains may pose to students walking or driving across the tracks near the school. "They just seem to go in all directions [and are] not as easily controlled" as younger students, Burke said.

The supervisor urged project officials to consider building elevated tracks near Dorsey High, half a mile east of where they are slated to start. The above-ground section would carry passengers to an elevated station at La Brea Avenue.

Burke suggested that project officials contact local, state and federal representatives in an effort to find additional funds to build the elevated line at Dorsey.

Thorpe said examining the issue is one thing, but building the elevated section is another. In addition to the cost, which could exceed \$10 million, such a change may require reopening the environmental impact report on the project. The original environmental study did not evaluate the effects of an elevated line at that location.

Officials at the Los Angeles Unified School District also have raised concerns about the Exposition project, including potential risks to the safety of students, teachers and staff. In a letter to the Public Utilities Commission last fall, environmental assessment coordinator Glenn Striegler said the district opposed the rail project as designed. He demanded that steps be taken to eliminate all rail-pedestrian conflicts on routes to schools in the area.

In addition to Dorsey High School, four other schools sit within 100 feet of the Exposition Line: Foshay Learning Center, Theodore Alexander Jr. Science Center, Adams Middle School and Central L.A. Area Middle School No. 4.

Mark Jolles, a member of a group called Expo Communities United, is protesting the Exposition construction authority's applications to construct at-grade crossings at numerous intersections. "I don't think safety is their primary concern," he said.

Jolles, a schoolteacher, said he was particularly concerned about locations where the trains would pass near schools.

Clint Simmons, who lives near the Exposition right of way, has joined Jolles in protesting the applications for at-grade crossings. "Nobody is against light rail, but do it right," he said.

Determined to get construction underway, the Exposition construction authority and the MTA have sought legislative help.

State Sen. Sheila Kuehl (D-Santa Monica) introduced legislation recently to limit to nine months the amount of time the Public Utilities Commission has to act on the grade-crossing applications.

Kuehl said she hopes the bill will encourage the commission "to be more collaborative" in working with the construction authority.

"We need to get the Expo line because half the time," Kuehl said, the Santa Monica Freeway "is a parking lot."

The second phase of the project is expected to link Culver City with Santa Monica, but the route remains undecided. Homeowner associations in upscale Westside neighborhoods object to using the old Exposition railroad right of way that runs through their area.

jeff.rabin@latimes.com

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