

Background on the Proposition A Rail Amendment (1980)

Los Angeles

By Wendell Cox,

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Background: In 1977, Mayor Tom Bradley appointed me to represent the city of Los Angeles on the new Los Angeles County Transportation Commission (LACTC). LACTC had been established by the state legislature as the transportation policy body for Los Angeles County, with responsibility to oversee both transit and highways. The principal members of LACTC were, by law, the Mayor of Los Angeles, the five Los Angeles County Supervisors (county commissioners), a city council representative from Long Beach, two city council representatives from cities other than Los Angeles and Long Beach and two additional appointees of the Mayor of Los Angeles (both requiring city council confirmation). Mayor Bradley routinely appointed the city council president to the first position. I was appointed by Mayor Bradley to the second position and was, as a result, the only principal member of LACTC who was not an elected official. All members of LACTC also had appointed alternates. I was appointed to a second term in 1981 and a third in 1985. In March 1985 I resigned to establish a consulting practice.

Proposition A Election Authorized by LACTC: On August 20, 1980, a special LACTC meeting was held. It had been called by Chairman Kenneth Hahn (a Los Angeles County Supervisor).

Supervisor Hahn had proposed lowering the bus fare to a flat \$0.50 throughout Los Angeles County for a period of five years. This would be financed by a one-half cent sales tax, which LACTC was authorized under state law to place on the ballot. It was unclear whether he had sufficient votes to obtain passage (six of the 11 votes were necessary).

Early in the meeting Mayor Ed Russ of Gardena, a member of the Commission, proposed a "local return" program that would dedicate 25 percent of the proposed tax revenues to cities for public transportation purposes based upon their percentage of population in Los Angeles County. The county of Los Angeles would receive local return funding for unincorporated areas. This amendment was accepted by Supervisor Hahn.

Supervisor Baxter Ward had been a long time supporter of rail and had been the driving force behind a 1978 ballot initiative that had lost by a 2-1 margin. Supervisor Ward introduced an amendment to dedicate 50 percent of the tax proceeds to building a rail system. Supervisor Hahn was unwilling to accept that motion and it died for lack of a second.

Shortly thereafter I privately suggested to Supervisor Ward (who was sitting next to me) that we ought to try for a 35 percent rapid transit set aside. My experience had suggested that any funding not dedicated to a specific purpose would be lost in subsequent labor negotiations as unit costs would continue to rise. I had also come to the Commission believing that a rapid transit system (busway or rail, depending upon cost effectiveness) would reduce traffic congestion and air pollution.

Supervisor Ward responded that 35 percent was simply not enough. I suggested that it was more than nothing. He consented to support my motion only if I specified "rail" instead of "rapid transit." I agreed

and introduced the motion. Supervisor Ward seconded the motion Supervisor Hahn indicated that he would be happy to accept the motion if it did not materially interfere with the bus fare reduction. Subsequent discussion changed to three years the period of the lower bus fare, and started the 35 percent rail set aside in the third year of the program.

The LACTC meeting then considered rail corridors to be included in the program. The adopted plan contained 10 corridors.

Proposition A Enacted by Voters: Proposition A passed by a 54-46 margin in November. A court challenge ensued over whether a simple majority or two-thirds vote was necessary to enact the tax. The California Supreme Court ruled in May 1982 that the tax had been validly passed and bus fares were reduced from July 1, 1982 to June 30, 1985. During this period, Southern California Rapid Transit District ridership rose 40 percent, from 354 million to 497 million annual boardings.

The Proposition A rail set aside provided funding for the Blue Line light rail line and the local match for the Red Line subway throughout the 1980s.

2016 Update: Subsequent to the approval of Proposition A, two additional one-half cent sales taxes for transit were approved by the voters of Los Angeles County (Proposition C in 1990 and Measure M in 2008). Overall, these three sales taxes have contributed more than \$33 billion to transportation purposes in Los Angeles. This includes approximately 76 percent to transit providers, principally for rail and bus, 22 percent to municipalities, principally for local transit purposes, and up to 2 percent for highways purposes (under Measure M). The “35 percent” amendment introduced at the August 20, 1980 meeting has contributed more than \$5 billion to the rail system, through 2015.

Meanwhile, ridership on the principal Los Angeles County transit system (MTA) is reported to have been below the peak year of 1985 ([475 million according to the *Los Angeles Times*](#)), when only bus service was provided. There have been ridership increases on municipal services and on the regional suburban rail system (Metrolink), which was established in the early 1990s. I doubt that any of my colleagues at LACTC would have believed that the addition of rail would not have raised MTA (then SCRTD) ridership (I expected not only larger ridership increases but also large transit market share increases).

Updated and adapted from: *Present at the Creation: The Los Angeles Rail System* (<http://www.publicpurpose.com/ut-larail80.htm>, posted August 10, 2000) and updated.