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COMMUNITY ORGANIZING WINS THE DAY: Merging the Skills and Enthusiasm of Many to Build Expo for All

Behind the May 20 opening of the Expo Line to Santa Monica lies the untold story of dozens of dedicated volunteers who worked for decades and made this line happen.

In 1989 Santa Monica city officials convened a group of citizens to advocate for the purchase of a former Red Car right-of-way from downtown Los Angeles to Santa Monica. They envisioned providing a fast, comfortable, and green light rail line along this route.

Among that group was Darrell Clarke, who, growing up in Los Angeles, had often talked with his parents about that city's red and yellow streetcars and their demise in 1963. Clarke joined this Committee to Preserve the Right-of-Way, which succeeded in convincing Los Angeles Metro's predecessor to buy this route.

The campaign to build the Expo Line light rail had begun.

Grassroots Organizing

The Exposition right of way had served trains carrying passengers from 1875 until 1953, and freight until the mid-1980s.

But in 1989 homeowners' groups in Cheviot Hills and Rancho Park opposed building a new passenger line on Exposition. So members of the Committee to Preserve the Right-of-Way documented the economic and social sense of the line, and pleaded their case by petitioning door to door and tabling at shopping malls.

Planning began after the right-of-way purchase, then halted, then restarted in 1998 after the cancellation of new subway extensions. Advocates resumed work, and in 2000 Clarke and community organizers Kathy Seal and Julia Maher launched a mass organization to fight for Expo light rail.

"We wanted to use the pressure of grassroots support to make the Expo Line happen," says Maher. "I knew this would change the way I felt about Los Angeles."

The group quickly attracted new activists, many of them women who were not typical rail buffs but who emphasized the social and environmental impact of a future Expo Line. "We saw this project as a way to bring people and communities together rather than dividing them," remembers attorney Faith Mitchell. She suggested "Connecting Neighbors" as the F4E slogan.

Adds Clarke, “We saw it as serving Westside and Downtown jobs, a ladder of economic opportunity giving residents greater access to the rich economic, educational and spiritual centers throughout the Los Angeles region.” As fighting against climate change rose on the national agenda, the activists stressed the environmental benefit of clean, speedy, high-capacity light rail.

Dozens of enthusiasts joined and Friends4Expo went to work, presenting slide shows to senior centers, churches, a mosque, neighborhood groups, chambers of commerce, Rotary clubs, schools, unions, and Neighborhood Councils flanking the right of way. They gathered thousands of signatures at community events and lobbied Los Angeles, Culver City, and Santa Monica city council members, and members of the Metro board. One elected official told the activists, “You start the parade and I’ll walk in front of it.” Which is what F4E did.

Relying on an email list of 2,500 and their website – <http://friends4expo.org> – F4E members brought supporters to attend Metro (MTA) board meetings and public hearings, including one especially boisterous meeting in the spring of 2001 at the Veterans Administration auditorium, where the huge and passionate support for Expo Light Rail surprised even the longtime activists.

On June 29th, 2001, after 56 people spoke in support, the Metro board unanimously approved the first half of the Expo Line as light rail from downtown L.A. to Culver City.

Friends4Expo members leaped from their seats in the board room and hugged each other with the joy of victory.

Organizing Cheviot Hills

But several homeowners associations for Cheviot Hills and nearby Rancho Park strongly opposed extending the line to Santa Monica (and would later fund a lawsuit against this second segment, as Neighbors for Smart Rail.)

In 2007 Friends4Expo member Karen Leonard launched a group, Light Rail for Cheviot, which did extensive grassroots education, organized neighborhood gatherings, met with politicians, and testified at Metro board, school, and city council meetings. They leafletted 1400 houses several times over the next few years. Finally, they showed politicians that the strong neighborhood support for the Expo Line dwarfed the opposition.

In 2012 the line opened from Downtown to La Cienega, and the following year the California Supreme Court ruled against the Neighbors for Smart Rail lawsuit.

Expo line ridership has exceeded expectations. F4E’s dozens of volunteers played a major role in bringing the more than 800,000 people living within two miles of the Expo Line – not to mention tourists and business travelers – an alternative to our region’s world-record traffic. Residents and visitors now enjoy a fast, comfortable, quiet, exhaust-free, high-capacity transit line serving their economic and cultural needs from downtown to the sea. Community organizing won the day.

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