

Metro, Arts District Stakeholders At Odds Over Project

Community Members Say \$80 Million Maintenance Facility Would Ruin a Proposed Plaza

By Eddie Kim

The Arts District is one of the hottest investment sectors not just in Downtown, but in all of Los Angeles. One \$80 million project, however, has local stakeholders up in arms.

A group of area leaders, with backing from the local councilman, are fighting with the Metropolitan Transportation Authority over plans to build a 55,000-square-foot facility that would house maintenance operations for a coming light rail line. They charge that the 55-foot-tall project would destroy progress in the area, hurt the site's potential as a gateway to the Los Angeles River, and dramatically impact access and sightlines for a community arts "park" and performance space that would be built under the \$401 million replacement of the Sixth Street Viaduct.

Metro officials counter that plans have been in the works for years, and that the spot just north of the current Sixth Street bridge is the best location for the project.

At issue is not only the project, but talk about the project. A coalition of Arts District stakeholders complain that despite months of bringing alternative plans to Metro, no progress has been made.

"What we hoped to see was the moving of the maintenance facility onto an alternative site that would have no impact, or little impact,

on the development of a robust and exciting community in the Arts District," said Jamie Bennett, chief operating officer of the Southern California Institute of Architecture. "We identified those sites, and Metro's response was that we were too late."

The fight is at least partially a result of the rapid change underway in the Arts District. The repair facility would serve Metro's coming \$2.8 billion Westside Purple Line extension, which underwent an environmental review process from 2009 to 2012. The city's review for the bridge, meanwhile, took place around the same time; plans solidified in 2013.

Metro officials considered several sites for the maintenance facility, said David Mieger, the agency's executive officer for transit corridor planning. Metro needs to build the project so that it can knock down older maintenance buildings near the One Santa Fe apartment complex, he said. The freed space would be used for construction of a "tumbuck" track to allow trains to flow into the maintenance facility and then reverse course back toward Union Station.

Metro's needs are legitimate, but the issue is the disconnect between the agency's plans and the construction of a new bridge with a community space, said Jonathan Jerald, a member of the Design Aesthetic Advisory Committee, a nine-person panel of area representatives —

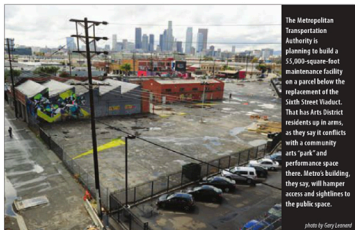


photo by Gary Leonard

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority is planning to build a 55,000-square-foot maintenance facility on a parcel below the replacement of the Sixth Street Viaduct. That has Arts District residents up in arms, as they say it conflicts with a community arts "park" and performance space there. Metro's building, they say, will hamper access and sightlines to the public space.

other members include SCI-Arc Director Eric Owen Moss and Friends of the Los Angeles River co-founder Lewis MacAdams — assembled to help shape the look of the viaduct.

"The MTA didn't know about the changing Arts District and the Sixth Street Bridge rebuild when they decided to go ahead with the maintenance facility plan," Jerald said. "Even in the EIR, you only see a tiny few references to this shed."

While Metro heard comments from a number of Downtown stakeholders during the EIR outreach process, most of the conversation was about the actual Purple Line, not the maintenance facility, Mieger noted. He did not recall any concerns about using the site next to the bridge.

"When we were reviewing sites, there wasn't

a lot happening in the Arts District, and it was mostly zoned for manufacturing and industrial [uses]," Mieger said. "Most of the development in the Arts District was up along Third Street, so our thought was that we should do this farther south. We thought we were doing the right thing at the time."

Battle at the Board Meeting

The dispute picked up heat last October, when a group of Arts District stakeholders testified against the proposed facility during a Metro board meeting. That prompted then-County Supervisor Gloria Molina and Mayor Eric Garcetti, chairman of the Metro board, to ask agency staff to meet with the stakeholders and study alternate plans.

SCI-Arc faculty member Heather Flood was tapped to create a study of how a maintenance facility could fit on alternate sites. Yuval Bar-Zemer, a principal at prominent area developer Linear City, reached out to property owners to see if they would be willing to sell land to Metro.

The parties could not find consensus.

"Every time they acted like there was no alternative, and when we came back with other options they would say, 'OK, we'll review it,' and just come back with a reason why it doesn't work," Bar-Zemer said. "In other words, there was no motivation to solve anything."

Mieger disputes that characterization, and said Metro made a good-faith effort to review the alternate sites, but found problems with each, including being in areas where plans are in motion for various developments involving Amtrak, Metrolink and the proposed state high-speed rail project.

Moving the facility would also mean having to perform another environmental impact study. Mieger said that would put at risk \$40 million in federal funds that the agency has already secured for the project. The money is contingent on Metro completing the structure by 2017.

"A few years' delay would also push everything back," Mieger said. "We can't tear down the other maintenance facilities before building this new one. And we can't do the turnback until we tear those old ones down. We need to finish all this a year before the Purple Line officially opens so we can test everything."

Council Objection

Area residents and business players are not the only ones concerned. At the October board meeting, Tanner Blackman, planning director for 14th District City Councilman José Huizar, testified that the city participated in meetings with

Metro in 2013 to pursue a more complementary redesign or a mixed-use facility. Instead, Metro went ahead and created construction bids with the original design, which he was "shocked" to find out about, Blackman said.

In a statement to Los Angeles Downtown News, Huizar said he is "frustrated" that Metro is not taking the community's concerns seriously in retooling the existing design.

"While my preference would be that Metro consider other sites, they stonewalled the community for months — refusing to show us the latest design for the current site," Huizar said. "And when they did share those designs with us, they looked exactly like their old design, which severely shortchanges the Arts District community and the iconic new Sixth Street Bridge Viaduct project. We need a sensible design with much lower sight lines and a smaller footprint."

Mieger said that some concessions are being made, including moving the building 28 feet back from the property line and moving the fence back. He also said the agency is willing to collaborate on a more "architecturally sensitive" design on the façade facing the bridge.

Regardless of what changes are possible, pursuing an alternative location for the project does not appear to be in the cards. Metro expects to move ahead soon with its construction bid, Mieger said. In the future, he added, the agency hopes to create a light-rail spur in the Arts District down along the L.A. River. That, Mieger added, could stimulate more growth in the neighborhood.

Bar-Zemer and the others pushing for an alternative site will continue communicating with Metro with hopes of changing the plan.

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