

# Metro's New Look

*LA County's Transit Agency  
is Changing  
How Los Angeles Looks, Moves, and Lives*



RELM

In November 2016, Angelenos gave Metro the directive to build. Measure M, approved by 71% of L.A. County voters, is one of the most ambitious, comprehensive transportation infrastructure programs in U.S. history. By 2040, it will fund numerous transportation improvements, including a rail connection to LAX, a rail line through the Sepulveda Pass, reimagining many of Metro's 170 bus lines, and funding long-term maintenance of the growing system. It's an audacious undertaking by any measure. Yet under the catalytic leadership of L.A. Metro CEO Phil Washington and Metro's forward-

thinking board, the agency looks to not only improve mobility around L.A. County, it wants to foster lasting social, economic, environmental, and cultural prosperity for communities that surround transit. And it's prepared to deliver such transformation. Equipped with a staggering \$6.6 billion budget this fiscal year, Metro is poised to create lasting change around our transit corridors. RELM sits down with Nick Saponara, Deputy Executive Officer, of Metro's Transit Oriented Communities Program to understand the agency's intrepid vision and how its fashioning urban life, and urban form, through transportation.



Nick Saponara, Deputy Executive Officer, Transit Orient Communities

*“Transportation investments being made in the region today will have a transformative effect beyond simply increasing mobility. That change can be disruptive and exclusive or it can be intentional and inclusive. We believe that we have a responsibility—and duty to the taxpayers—to strive for the latter...transportation can be a bridge to opportunity.”*

## **Can you explain your role at METRO?**

I help lead L.A. Metro's Transit Oriented Communities (TOC) team, which is responsible for administering programs and projects to foster neighborhoods that—by their design—allow people to drive less and access transit more. Through our TOC initiatives, L.A. Metro is taking a holistic community development approach to station area planning to maximize equitable access to our growing, multi-modal transit network. This includes programs such as joint development through which we partner with private developers to implement transit-oriented developments, including affordable housing to encourage ridership and decrease auto dependency. We're also focused on first/last mile connections to ensure that there is access to our transportation systems—a significant challenge in L.A. County given the sprawling development patterns. Once riders reach our service, what is their experience as they journey into and through our system? We're focused on the built environment and the role that urban design and system architecture play in the user's experience. Collectively, these efforts aim to promote equitable, livable communities that capitalize on their proximity to transit.

**As stated in Metro Vision 2028, the agency's mission 'is to provide a world-class transportation system that enhances quality of life for those who live, work, and play within LA County.' It goes further stating, 'transportation interfaces with quality of life issues, such as equity, economic opportunity, gentrification, displacement, affordable housing, homelessness, environment, public health, and access to education and health care.' Does this philosophy set Metro apart from other transit agencies?**

I do believe Metro is redefining the role of the transportation agency. Fundamentally, we plan, fund, build and operate mobility systems throughout L.A. County. But in recent years, that mandate has expanded. There's an acknowledgment that transportation investments being made in the region today will have a transformative effect beyond simply increasing mobility. That change can be disruptive and exclusive or it can be intentional and inclusive. We believe that we have a responsibility—and duty to the taxpayers—to strive for the latter. Although tremendous social and economic disparities exist throughout the region, transportation can be a bridge to opportunity.



*“The most important part of TOC is the community.”*



## **How does such a socially minded philosophy influence Metro's planning and implementation of projects?**

The most important part of TOC is the community. At the end of day, we serve people, and their voice in the process is critical to ensuring that the decision-making is inclusive and responsive to community needs. For example, before we engage the development community, our Joint Development process begins with extensive community engagement to better understand the needs and priorities of stakeholders in the area which informs 'development guidelines' that get packaged as a part of the developer Request for Proposals. We think in doing that, we're able to begin to lay a path for developers to help them ensure that their responses to those solicitation fulfill the community's vision

and stand a greater chance of being successful projects. Another example is the recently completed First/Last Mile Plan for the Metro Blue Line, a first in terms of a corridor-wide plan to improve safe access. Critical to that process were partnerships with a number of grassroots Community Based Organizations (CBOs) that helped facilitate innovative community engagement to reach individuals who might not otherwise have had their voices and perspectives heard. The result was a recommended set of improvements that are responsive to the needs of actual users in the community. Perhaps more importantly, it has instilled confidence in the process.





**You mentioned first/last mile strategies. How is that being accounted for in the system expansion?**

You so often hear people say they would take Metro if only it were more convenient. Improving accessibility to the transit system is key to growing the ridership base. Metro took a huge leap forward in 2014 with the First/Last Mile Strategic Plan, a nationally recognized visioning document for improving access to transit, which RELM (then Melendrez) played a critical role in developing. First/last mile planning, which includes infrastructure and facilities such as safe sidewalks and crossings, bike lanes, signage and wayfinding, has taken root and been elevated as a priority in the system expansion.

Our Board has enacted policy that calls for new transit lines being developed as part of Measure M to include first/last mile improvements in the planning of the transit corridors, and together with local jurisdiction, to implement the improvements concurrent with the transit project. In fact, cities are required to support 3% of the cost of building a new line within their boundaries. This policy incentivizes cities by allowing them to receive a credit toward that obligation if they construct first/last mile improvements identified in the transit corridor plan.





**One project you lead is Crenshaw Crossing, a joint development project between Metro and LA County. What are Metro's stated goals in this and do they differ, or are they completely synonymous with LA County's?**

Well, I think Metro and the County of Los Angeles had shared goals in maximizing the opportunity presented at this transit-rich intersection while fulfilling a number of public policy objectives. There are limited places in L.A. County where two light rail lines meet; in this case, the Crenshaw/LAX Line (to be completed in 2019) will connect with the Expo Line.

Essentially, a patron can take a single seat ride to Santa Monica, Culver City, USC, Downtown L.A., East L.A. and south through the historical Crenshaw Corridor, the city of Inglewood, the airport and ultimately into the South Bay. That, coupled with two of the four corners of this intersection consisting of publicly owned land provided a compelling reason to join forces with the county to pursue an integrated development that can demonstrate how a community development approach to TOD can be a neighborhood asset.



An architectural rendering of a transit-oriented development. In the foreground, a white and yellow light rail train with a circular logo on its front travels along tracks. To the left of the tracks is a wide, paved pedestrian plaza with people walking, sitting on benches, and playing. A small blue food cart is parked near the tracks. In the background, a large, modern building with a complex, multi-level facade of balconies and terraces stands behind a row of trees. The sky is clear and blue.

3.5 ACRES  
2 TRAIN LINES  
492 UNITS  
45,000 OF COMMUNITY  
ORIENTED RETAIL





“THE COMMUNITY  
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MARKET RATE, NOR FULLY  
AFFORDABLE.”

The rendering depicts a multi-level transit hub. The upper mezzanine features a wide, open plaza with a modern, sculptural light fixture and a view of a city and water in the distance. People are shown walking and playing on this level. The ground floor is a large, open space with a tiled floor. On the left, a 'TransitScreen' displays train schedules. To the right, a grocery store is visible through large glass windows, with shelves stocked with various goods and fresh produce displayed in bins and baskets. People are seen shopping and walking through the store. The overall design is clean, modern, and functional, emphasizing a mix of transit and community amenities.





“RESIDENTS DESIRE A  
VILLAGE EXPERIENCE THAT  
IS A WALKABLE AND SAFE  
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GREEN AND OPEN SPACE.”



**M**  
Metro

Expo/  
Crenshaw



to Santa  
Monica

form 1



**In Metro's initial outreach meetings with the community, Crenshaw residents stated they wanted a mixed income development. Did this surprise you given the rapid gentrification of the area?**

Not entirely. What we've been experiencing is that each community has different priorities and pressure points. In Boyle Heights, for example, there was very strong support for 100% affordable housing projects at deep levels of affordability. What we heard along the Crenshaw Corridor was somewhat different. The Crenshaw Corridor and much of South L.A. has historically not experienced investment even during large boom cycles in real estate where other communities throughout the region did. To that end, many local residents welcome the investment and look forward to high-quality retail services, grocery stores, and sit-down restaurants that have not chosen to open doors in the area to-date. There certainly is concern about the inevitable change and gentrification pressures that are going to come as a result of the transit investment, and in fact, that change is already beginning

to occur. Many vocal stakeholders are calling for much needed affordable housing, but that is tempered by other stakeholders who want to see a balanced mix of housing types and income levels.

Despite the diverse perspectives on new housing types, what we heard consistently is that folks want what is built to be accessible to those who call the Crenshaw Corridor home today, which ranges from disadvantaged neighborhoods with high poverty rates to some of the most affluent African-American communities in the nation. A successful joint development at this site must balance these needs carefully, while also celebrating the history and culture of the area. play in the user's experience. Collectively, these efforts aim to promote equitable, livable communities that capitalize on their proximity to transit.

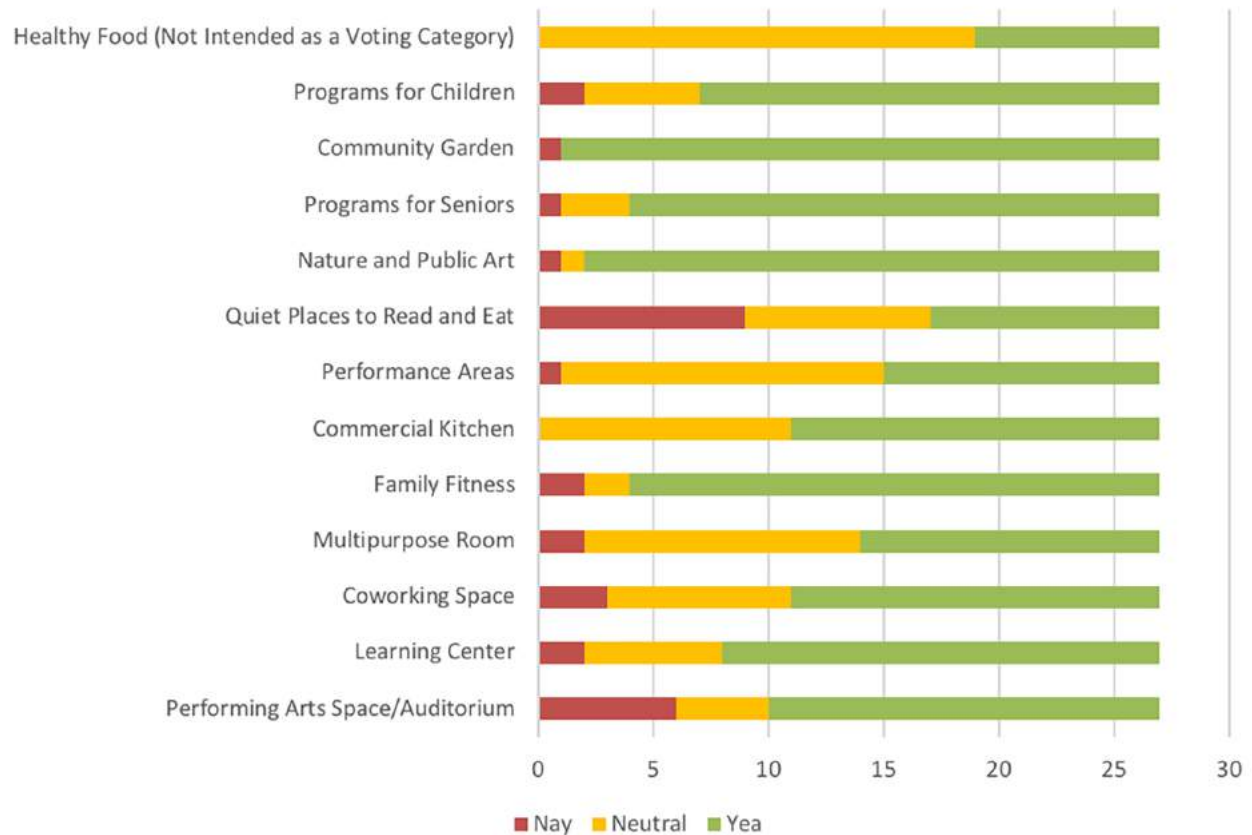
*“We recognize that our developments are experienced at the ground level.”*

**One of the unique attributes of these lines crossing is that one is below ground, another at street level which will result in a lot of foot traffic making the transfer between lines. How will that impact that development and the space around it?**

The urban design experience becomes incredibly important at Crenshaw Crossing. We anticipate a high volume of transfer activity between the underground station along the Crenshaw/LAX Line and the existing above ground station on the Expo Line. The Crenshaw Crossing project has an opportunity to ensure that there is a very successful public realm that links together these two lines. A key aspect of the proposed development is extensive open space which connect the public realm to the transit stations. These developments will serve as a gateway presence along the corridor but the average person is experiencing it on the ground level, and that's

why the community amenities, retail offerings, and public space become so critical.

We heard a lot of good dialogue and a lot of good input from the community about their priorities for how that space gets programmed. Suggestions for use of space echoed the roundtables, and included sit-down restaurants, a gym, rooftop pools and sundecks, a walking track, a community garden, places for children to actively play either physically or mentally, such as chess, checkers, and a venue to learn to build and race robots. Additionally, space for participation in the arts and learning were touched on.



Dot Voting Tallies. Neutral responses inferred based on uniform participation of 27 voters.

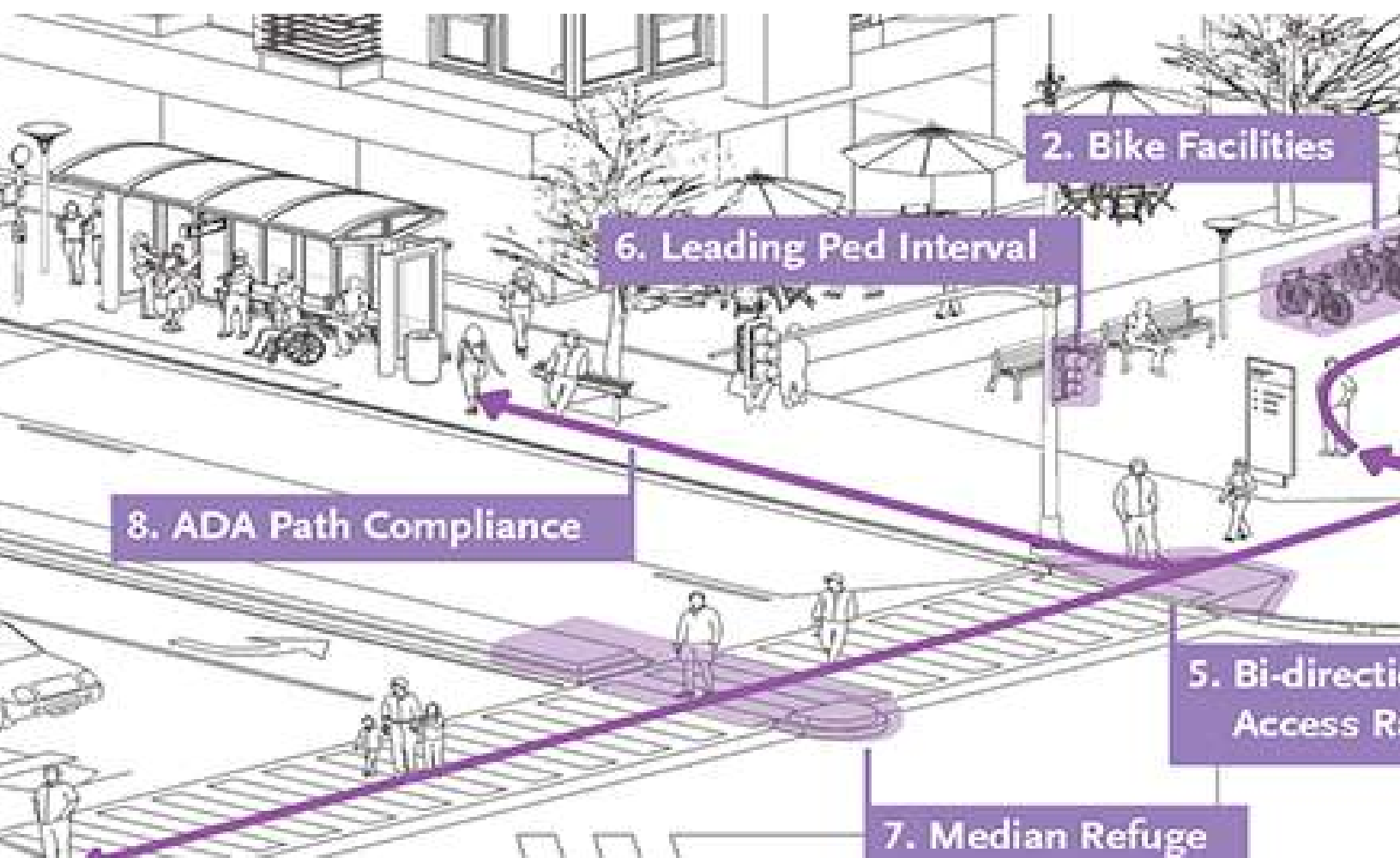
*Community gardens, nature and public art, family fitness all scored overwhelmingly positively. Activities for seniors also scored very high, though this may be due to the demographics of the audience.*

## Beyond real estate development, how is Metro fashioning LA's urban form?

Through Measure M alone, we are investing \$120 billion over the next 40 years. The potential for transformative impact on the built environment is tremendous throughout the county.. We have an obligation to ensure that what we build is contextually responsive and sets the stage for a successful public realm. For starters, we need to ensure we do no harm. There is a long, storied history in this country of transportation investment—namely, the massive highway expansion of the mid-twentieth century—which bisected and tore communities apart. We are trying to bring communities together.

That requires that we carefully consider the existing urban and stitch the transit infrastructure into the urban context in a contextually sensitive manner that also supports transit system utilization.

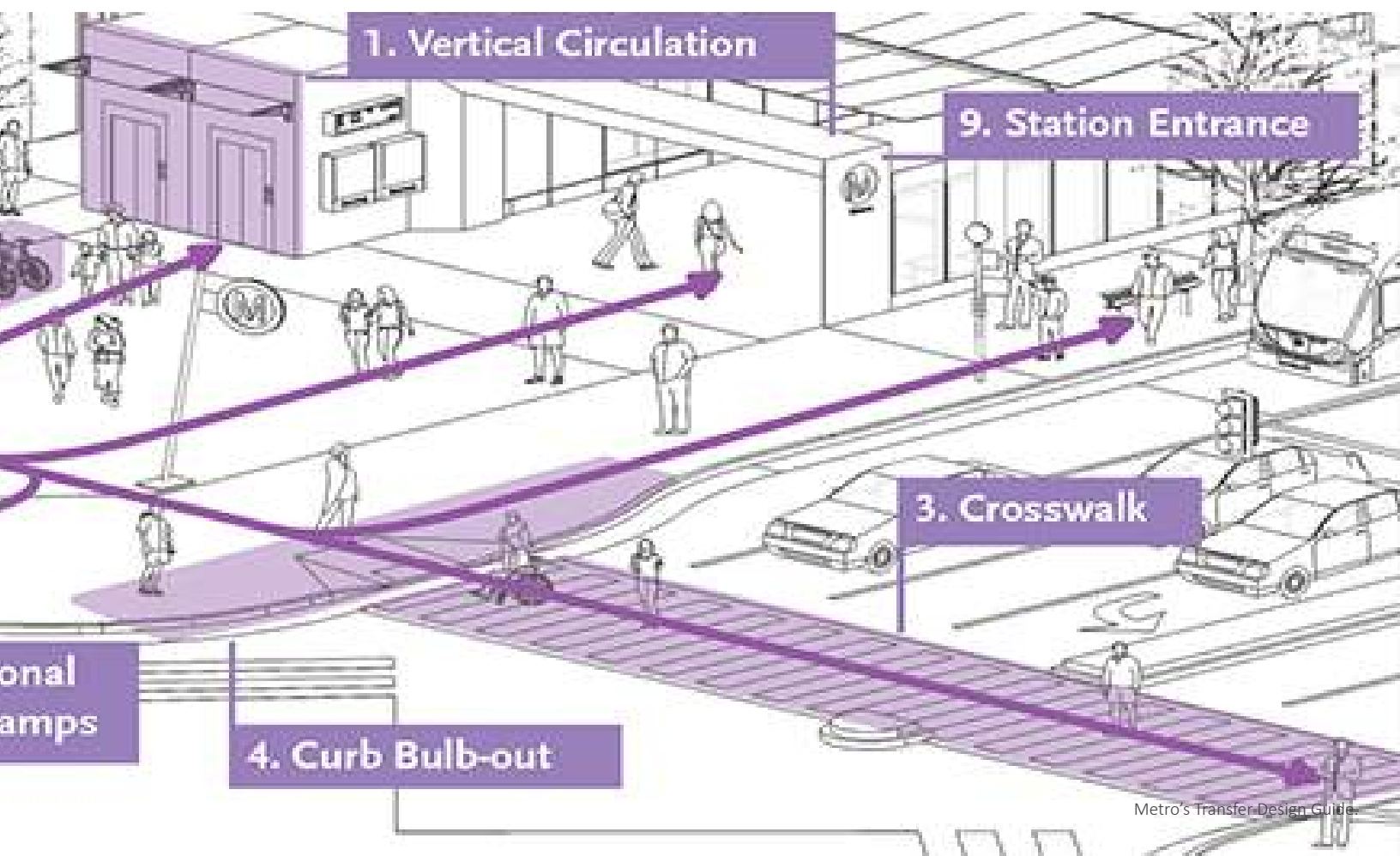
From an urban design perspective, we are most focused on the human condition in the shared space of our communities. The shared space of streets, sidewalks, and plazas, and how that impacts the user experience. Given the recent declines in ridership, ensuring a positive user experience is more important than ever, and the built environment is critical to that. Metro



just released a Transfers Design Guide, a best practices resource with recommendations to improve connectivity for transit customers who transfer as part of their trip, which by the way, nearly two-thirds of users do. The guide breaks down the user experience, and provides a toolbox for how Metro, local jurisdictions, transit operators, adjacent property owners, and other stakeholders can contribute to creating a safe, comfortable and efficient journey which we hope will translate to bolstered ridership.

We are also working to ensure that with the unprecedented expansion of the

transit system that we are investing in creating world-class stations and system architecture. The Metro Board recently approved a Systemwide Station Design policy that will result in a safer, smarter, cleaner and greener system. Through a modular “kit-of-parts” approach consisting of a streamlined design and high performance architectural materials, we will ensure a recognizable brand identity that is also cost effective to operate and maintain. We are looking forward to the 2019 opening of the Crenshaw/LAX Line, the first new transit line to incorporate the new systemwide design.



**It's great to hear a transit agency champion quality public space. Given that Metro doesn't have jurisdiction to implement best practices, how are you ensuring a better public realm?**

It's a great question. While Metro does not control surrounding land uses, adjacent private development, or the streets and sidewalks in the public right-of-way, we have a vested interest in the outcomes as it impacts transit utilization. Partnerships are key to success. Since 2011, we have invested more than \$25 million in grants to local cities to develop transit supportive land use plans encompassing more than 75 stations throughout the

County. This will result in greater development densities, mix of uses, and lower parking requirements, all of which help to support a transit-oriented community. We've also provided leadership to help incentivize cities to implement first/last mile improvements connecting to the transit system. The Blue Line First/Last Mile Plan I previously mentioned is a great example of that. Metro led the plan development for all 22 stations in



**Integrated station elements make the ride more reliable and enjoyable.**

partnership with the many municipalities along the corridor. We are now in the process of preparing grant applications on behalf of the local jurisdictions to secure state funding to actually implement some of those improvements.

While our Joint Development Program is one way we can actively help shape quality development and open space on land we own near our transit stations in partnership with private developers, this represents such a small share of development activity near transit.

As our system expands, and more development occurs near transit we are finding it increasingly important to proactively coordinate with cities and developers on private development activity. We recently published a Metro Adjacent Development Handbook intended to support the creation of integrated, vibrant places around transit while reducing potential construction and operational conflicts. All of these tools help ensure a better public realm, even in instances where we do not have jurisdiction to implement best practices unilaterally.



#### STREET LEVEL STATION

- |                                       |                                        |
|---------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| 1 Station identification signage      | 7 Fully Integrated LED lighting        |
| 2 Stainless steel railing             | 8 Glass canopy                         |
| 3 Stainless steel ticketing structure | 9 Wall-mounted mapcases                |
| 4 Consistent systemwide branding      | 10 Porcelain enamel steel artwork      |
| 5 Consistent wayfinding signage       | 11 Benches incorporated into structure |
| 6 Real-time electronic signage        |                                        |

## **With such a broad community development mandate, is it fair to consider Metro the new Community Redevelopment Agency (CRA) in Los Angeles?**

Some have certainly suggested that, and I think the timing of the elimination of redevelopment agencies on the heels of an accelerating investment in transit in L.A. County—beginning in 2008 with the passage of Measure R—makes it easy to draw that comparison. It is important to note that the mandate, powers and resources of now-defunct redevelopment agencies were far more expansive when it comes to community development programs. Yet,

there was undoubtedly a void left by their elimination which I think helped open the door for Metro leadership to begin to recognize the relationship between transit investment and affordable housing, for example. Like redevelopment, Metro is an economic engine that will shape the social and physical fabric of communities, and with that comes tremendous responsibility, and I think we are up for the challenge.



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