

Our View: Help ACE finish what it started

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WHEN you think of federal highway funds, naturally you think of money for freeways or interstate highways. And that is as it should be. Because let's face it, efficiently moving cars and trucks is key to America's productivity.

But there is a third component funded by federal highway dollars that is an "orphan" to the Big Daddy highway projects. The Alameda Corridor East Construction Authority acts as a foster parent looking to raise federal dollars to help build 20 grade separation projects here in the San Gabriel Valley that will make automobiles and freight trains travel much smoother, safer and faster.

This 12-year-old agency has been successful in taking accident-prone at-grade intersections of roadways and Union Pacific Railway tracks and turning them into bypasses, underpasses, overpasses or train flyovers. Today's scheduled opening of the \$96 million Sunset Avenue "flyover" project in Industry adds another completed project to the ACE family. The steel bridge visible from Valley Boulevard, that takes the trains up and over Sunset and Orange avenues will ease traffic congestion by bringing wait times to zero, and also eliminate future train-car collisions.

But while the independent agency has funded or completed 14 of 20 projects though a mixture of state, Measure R (countywide half-cent sales tax) and some federal dollars, it needs additional federal dollars to fully fund the remaining six: two at Fairway Drive in Industry at the entrance to Walnut; one each at Puente Avenue, Turnbull Canyon Road, Rose Hills Road and Montebello Boulevard. The ACE has asked Congress for \$350 million, a tiny portion of what will be a mega-billion dollar federal surface transportation program bill. We believe such funding would amount to federal tax dollars well spent and therefore, the ACE projects should become part of the new reauthorization bill.

Again, we agree there are more pressing needs. Our highways and freeways need repaving. Interchanges need updating. And bridges need retrofitting. But second to such primary needs are the ACE projects. And Congress should find room in the bill for this funding request. This is not just for the San Gabriel Valley but will benefit the entire country.

The twin ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach account for 40 percent of international trade via containers. Those containers get offloaded from ships and put on trains mostly heading East. That means the 70 miles of freight trains that cut a swath through the belly of the San Gabriel Valley are getting longer, clogging traffic and causing accidents. Even with the recent recession, container volumes are expected to triple by 2035. Daily rail traffic has increased in the SGV from 55 freight trains in 2003 to 78 this year. Good for America's economic growth. Bad for San Gabriel Valley motorists, paramedics and ambulances waiting at the gates for

trains to pass by. Bad also for the residents who breathe in additional pollutants caused by idling vehicles.

Sources tell us that Congress has always viewed the practical, ACE Construction Authority and its projects as a win-win. As port traffic grows, so does American business (imports); it makes sense to graduate to modern road overpasses (such as the finished underpasses at Nogales Street in West Covina and Ramona Boulevard in El Monte). Projects also create new construction jobs. And there's evidence that improved roadways have had a positive effect on the warehouse/logistics industry that hug the tracks in the central San Gabriel Valley.

For all these reasons, Congress should help ACE finish what it started. It's for the good of not only our region but the rest of the country as well.