



Expo Phase 1 (in blue) opens this weekend. Phase 2? Who knows.

This weekend, the long awaited [Expo Light Rail Line](#) will [finally open](#) in Los Angeles, connecting the traffic-choked Westside with the rest of the city's rail network, more than two decades after the region's first modern rail line opened. The relatively [short light rail line](#) (8.6 miles, 12 stations) took an absurdly long amount of time to build. To put it in human terms, my wife and I attended the groundbreaking ceremony when she was three months pregnant with our first child. That same child just celebrated his fifth birthday last week. All this for a construction process that utilized an existing right-of-way and required no new tunneling.

Why did construction take so long? Two answers: lack of government coordination and citizen lawsuits (a third answer of poor construction oversight could arguably apply to most large public works projects these days). The lack of government coordination hindered the construction authority building Expo, which had to work with the local utility on relocating power lines, the California Department of Transportation on a rail bridge over the freeway, and the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) on all intersection crossings. For a variety of reasons, this process didn't always go smoothly, resulting in project delays and additional expenses.

Meanwhile, citizens groups brought lawsuits over the safety of the mostly surface-level train route through densely populated areas. They were primarily concerned with the impact on two schools adjacent to the route, Dorsey High School and the Foshay Learning Center. The groups challenged the project at the California Public Utilities Commission over the intersections in question, thus [holding up the project and forcing expensive mitigation measures](#) (primarily an additional station near the schools to slow the train).

As a result, a projected four-year construction period dragged on to six years, while the cost surged forty percent over the initial estimate to [\\$930 million](#). And this brief history does not even include the brutal local opposition to the line that kept it from getting built for fifteen years after the county purchased the right-of-way.

While the construction challenges are now mostly in the past for Expo, they represent an important lesson for rail advocates in California, including High Speed Rail proponents. For example, the Brown Administration has [reportedly been in discussion](#) with environmental groups about streamlining environmental review for

the system. But as the Expo history demonstrates, faster CEQA/NEPA review won't necessarily help the line get built any faster (although it could at least get construction started sooner). High Speed Rail will face the same complicated thicket of local government land use policies, myriad state and local agencies, and broader federal environmental laws that helped slow Expo down at various points in its history. The CPUC process alone probably cost Expo two years worth of delays.

All this is to say that if Expo seemed like a long wait, Californians may not see High Speed Rail until my son starts qualifying for senior citizen discounts.