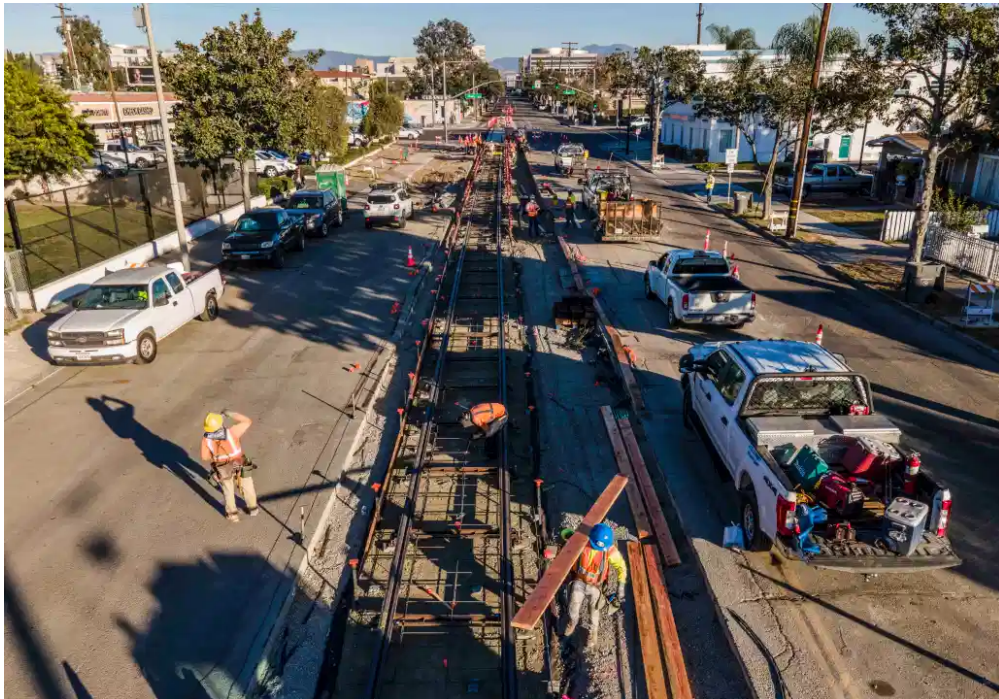


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By **LOU PONSI** |

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The first rails have been set in place for the OC Streetcar, marking a milestone for the county's newest mode of transportation.

Work crews installed the rails at the intersection of Bristol Street and Santa Ana Boulevard, working their way toward Raitt Street this week as construction progresses along the 4.1 mile route through Santa Ana and Garden Grove.

Scheduled to be completed in late 2022 or early 2023, the OC Streetcar will carry passengers in both directions between the Santa Ana Transit Center and a stop near the intersection of Westminster Avenue and Harbor Boulevard, traversing along Santa Ana Boulevard and old Pacific Electric right-of-way.

Powered by overhead electric wires, Orange County's first modern-day streetcar will run daily, making 10 stops in each direction every 10 to 15 minutes and connect with other transportation options, including Metrolink and Amtrack trains and OCTA buses. The route runs past the Civic Center in Santa Ana, which houses the main county, federal and courthouse buildings.

Construction began in late 2018.

"This is a major connection between rail lines and bus systems," OCTA CEO Darrell Johnson said. "There is no one mode, whether it is a street, a bike, a bus, or train that is going to work for everyone."

Once in service, the streetcar will immediately be a "benefit for people who are riding Metrolink in from south Orange County or Oceanside that work at the Civic Center or have business at the court house."

OCTA officials say the 4.1 mile route is planned to be the first of multiple phases for the OC Streetcar and they envision a far-reaching network connecting riders to some of the county's major business and recreational hubs.

"With the first phase already under construction and opening within the next couple of years, I think it would be prudent for us to get Phase 2 planned out and designed so it can piggyback naturally," said OCTA Board Chairman Steve Jones, who is also the mayor of Garden Grove. "I also think it is just good to keep the momentum going because we want this to be a system throughout the whole county and not just a standalone 4 mile leg."

Expansion of the OC Streetcar makes sense, Johnson said, especially because the county has a population of more than 3 million people, and borders heavily populated Los Angeles, Riverside and San Diego counties.



“As we show people that there are truly good choices beside the 91 freeway, besides the 57 (freeway) and the 5 (freeway) ... the idea of quality transit, rail transit in this case, has been proven time and time again in other parts of California, as well as the western United States and the United States and worldwide,” Johnson said. “It does give people that other choice.”

The OC Streetcar project involves excavating in some of the oldest areas of the county and there have been some surprises along the way, officials said.

Old buried railroad ties from rail cars that ran decades ago were found. Also, human remains, likely from a Native American, were also discovered, forcing a short halt to work while the Native American Heritage Commission was contacted, Johnson said.

“From a local history standpoint, we want to be respectful and thoughtful on how we manage through that,” he said.

Funding for the \$408 million project came from the state and from Measure M, Orange County’s half-cent sales tax for transportation improvements.

The Federal Transit Administration also awarded the project \$149 million.

As the roadways are prepped for the system, construction on the streetcar vehicles has also commenced. Six vehicles and two spares will be used.

And, earlier this year, the \$45 million contract for operating the streetcar was awarded.

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