



Powered by

Click to Print

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Blue Line takes a troubled route

By Martin Kasindorf, USA TODAY

LOS ANGELES — At St. Lawrence Brindisi Roman Catholic Church in Watts, a block from the Metro Blue Line tracks, the priests still say Mass for Rosa Cebellos.



The Blue Line Metro Rail runs south from Downtown Los Angeles to Long Beach on it's 22-mile route.

By Bob Riha, Jr., USA TODAY

In 1990, Cebellos, 66, was the first fatality on the new, 22-mile light-rail line from downtown to Long Beach. "She was a wonderful grandmother, known as the taco lady because she was always over at the church preparing food at the shelter," says Tom Rubin, an Oakland transportation consultant, who headed Blue Line safety then. "We ran her over on the way to church." (**Related item:** [Light-rail fatalities, 1990-2002](#))

The accident set a pattern of public relations woes for the Blue Line. A train once destroyed a police car on the first day of Rail Safety Month.

Like almost all U.S. light-rail systems, the electric cars run on tracks built at grade — street level — to save money and to mix with pedestrians, cars and buses at low speeds downtown.

The trains run by the Los Angeles County Metropolitan Transportation Authority are packed with riders. About 70,000 pay the \$1.35 fare on an average weekday. But the trains frequently hit errant motorists and pedestrians, jinxing the Blue Line with the worst record of deaths and injuries among the nation's 18 big-city light-rail systems.

When Angela Barahona, 16, was struck by a train Nov. 22, she became the 61st Blue Line fatality. The San Diego Trolley is a distant second in deaths, 22 since 1990. The national average for streetcar systems is 8.7 deaths over that period.

The Blue Line's grisly record has been one of the few obstacles to a national building boom in light rail. Opponents of a Salt Lake City streetcar project cited the L.A. statistics in trying to block the 1999 inaugural of the city's TRAX cars — which rolled anyway. Five deaths have occurred in Salt Lake City since.

Faced with communities' safety fears, Los Angeles officials who are constructing a 13.7-mile Gold Line to Pasadena agreed to install state-of-the-art gates at crossings — and to slow the Gold trains down. The line is scheduled to open in July.

The federal government regulates railroads, leaving light rail to the states. But publicity in 1999 over 10 Blue Line deaths that year — and five on the new Portland, Ore., West Side Line — prompted Washington to issue guidelines to states and localities on installing warning signs and barriers.

Transit start-ups

In more than 40 cities, politicians haven't let Blue Line blues stop them from requesting billions of dollars from the Federal Transit Administration to start light-rail systems or expand existing ones.

- Tacoma, Wash., is scheduled to open a 1.6-mile track in September.
- Minneapolis-St. Paul's Hiawatha Line is slated for April 2004.
- The New York City AirTrain to John F. Kennedy International Airport is about a year from service.
- Phoenix plans a 2003 construction start on a 20-mile trolley to Tempe and Mesa.

Projects have been approved or proposed in Seattle; Charlotte; Miami; Orange County, Calif.; Tampa; Norfolk, Va.; and dozens of other cities.

With all the track-laying, U.S. passenger trips on light rail grew 72% from 1991 to 2000, compared with 4% growth for buses and 22% for subways, the Federal Transit Administration says.

Even New Orleans' long-defunct "streetcar named Desire" may return. The local transit authority is doing design and engineering studies on restoring the tracks to the Desire district. New tramcars would replicate the ones Tennessee Williams knew.

Popular mode of travel

Wendell Cox, a Belleville, Ill., transit consultant, says cities choose light rail for two reasons: "voters think it reduces traffic congestion" — it doesn't, he says — and civic boosters covet a trolley as an "urban jewel," like a stadium or convention center.

Robert Jamison, deputy administrator of the Federal Transit Administration, says light rail is hot because "it can operate in a broad range of environments, and it is a very safe mode, one of the safest modes of travel."

Jamison's agency reports that light rail had 0.99 accidents per million passenger-miles in 2000, compared with 2.29 for transit buses and 0.92 for subway trains.

Passenger safety isn't an issue. In Los Angeles, no rider has died inside the 47-ton Blue Line cars. As in other cities, casualties have been motorists, their passengers, cyclists and pedestrians.

Authorities list 11 of the 61 deaths as suicides. They blame the other incidents on negligent behavior by the public. Juries agree; the MTA has paid little in court judgments.

Most collisions result from cars and trucks making left turns in violation of signals, often in front of an unseen train approaching from behind. Vehicles or walkers dodging crossing arms or ignoring flashing signals account for most other accidents.

"They're more prone to taking risks here in L.A.," says Vijay Khawani, director of MTA rail safety operations.

In the worst incident, an unlicensed taxi in Compton raced a train and made an S-turn around a lowered gate in 1999. The train sliced the cab in half, killing the driver and five passengers.

"People don't realize that trains don't stop on a dime, trains don't swerve and trains don't apologize," says Abdul Zohbi, MTA manager of rail safety.

Two people died on the Blue Line last year. Khawani says the trend in train-vehicle collisions is downward, "but the biggest problem now is train-pedestrian accidents. They're very hard to control. I think they're on the rise. Impatient pedestrians see the train coming, think they can beat it, run around the gate."

'Look, Listen, Live'

The Blue Line has a high potential for accidents. The route, through densely populated, low-income suburbs where many immigrants speak no English, has 101 grade crossings.

Most deaths occur at intersections in a 16-mile stretch where trains barrel through at 55 mph, sounding the horn. Barriers and signals are installed to keep the track clear.

Too often, they don't.

"In the long run, until you grade-separate these systems, you're going to have these problems," Cox says. The MTA's 5-year-old Green Line, built atop a freeway median, has had only one fatality, a suicide.

Moving the Blue Line off the street would cost up to \$1.6 billion, about twice the original \$877 million construction cost, the MTA estimates. Since that's a non-starter, the MTA is trying a public education campaign.

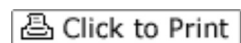
On posters, basketball star Lisa Leslie of the WNBA's Los Angeles Sparks counsels Angelenos to "Look, Listen, Live." Safety officials visit schools and senior centers.

At the Vernon station, an experimental electronic sign indicating that a second train is coming warns that it's unsafe to cross the tracks behind a train that has passed. Thirteen crossings are being upgraded, at \$200,000 each, to "four-quadrant" gates covering every traffic lane to prevent dodging. Fines for running gates have been raised from \$104 to \$271; cameras are watching, and one sheriff's deputy wrote 1,898 citations in 2000. On some sidewalks, pedestrians face new crossing gates.

"We're extremely pleased in the direction we're going," says John Cato, MTA deputy CEO for rail. But consultant Rubin says it won't be easy to save the public from its spaciness. "There's a saying in this business," he says, "that there's nothing foolproof. The fools are too ingenious."

Find this article at:

http://www.usatoday.com/news/nation/2003-01-06-blue-line-usat_x.htm



[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

Copyright 2009 USA TODAY, a division of Gannett Co. Inc.