

Will L.A.'s Expo Line speed up development?

Several spots near stops along the new light-rail route, which will extend from downtown to Santa Monica, appear ripe for renovation



PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRIAN VAN DER BRUG Los Angeles Times



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OPEN FOR BUSINESS: Audiovisual media firm Bandito Bros. has its headquarters at Blackwelder.

ROGER VINCENT

At first glance, office buildings in the rustic complex on the edge of Culver City look decidedly down-market.

The mismatched assortment of corrugated steel, wood and concrete structures on La Cienega Boulevard were thrown up haphazardly after World War II. But inside it's a different story.

The complex today, known as Blackwelder, is home to upscale firms in creative fields such as movie production and fashion, and the renovated interiors tend to be rich in design with walnut stairs, European-style kitchens and 3-D theaters.

One of the main reasons the complex has attracted premium clientele is the light-rail Expo Line, which will run from downtown Los Angeles to Santa Monica when completed in 2015. It will have a stop nearby.

But so far, the Blackwelder is just about the only new development project along the route.

"The Expo Line is kind of sparse" so far, said Roger Moliere, chief of real property management and development for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority.

Blackwelder is an example of how urban development is supposed to work, according to planners who have encouraged the construction of billions of dollars' worth of housing, retail, hotel and office complexes

around Los Angeles rail transit stops since the 1990s.

The complex has been undergoing an \$80-million renovation to meet the expectations of artistic company owners who couldn't bear to work in ordinary glass-box office buildings. Such firms tend to lean "green" and want to be near public transit, said Blackwelder developer Jonathan Genton, who started buying the buildings from multiple owners in 2007.

"I just sort of follow the train lines around," said Genton, who also has projects along public transit routes in South Pasadena and San Diego.

The Expo Line is an amenity he pitched to prospective tenants at Blackwelder, parts of which are still undergoing renovation.

"People here do walk, bike and take transit," he said. "Being green is important."

The Expo Line will transform blocks of La Cienega Boulevard south of the Santa Monica Freeway that are already a major artery for cars and buses, he predicted.

"This is the Mississippi and Ohio River junction of transit lines," he said. "The train will change the entire neighborhood."

The first section of the Expo Line, from downtown L.A. through USC and on to the intersection of La Cienega and Exposition boulevards, is nearly complete and expected to open in the fall. The line is expected to ex-

tend to Culver City early next year.

Culver City Mayor Micheal O'Leary can hardly wait.

"It's an exciting time," O'Leary said. No development at the future train station at Venice and Robertson boulevards has been announced. But O'Leary envisions apartments, a hotel, offices, shops and underground parking on a triangular parcel of land across from the elevated station.

"Developers will look at this as a crucial piece of land," he said. At first, the parcel will be used for parking.

Residents of areas near the line might not share the excitement of planners and city officials. Assertions that transit-oriented development is good for future generations aren't always persuasive in car-centric Los Angeles, said real estate attorney Paul Rohrer.

"Neighbors are often less concerned about the future than finding a place to park," he said. "Today, you are going to put more traffic on my street."

Rohrer acknowledged that encouraging density around transit hubs is an attempt to influence people's behavior.

"When there are nodes of density at each station, cars will go off the road because people will use transit to get from one stop to another stop," he said. "If there was never any density at transit stations,

there would never be anyone taking transit."

Another spot that transit officials see as a prime site for development along the line is the Crenshaw Boulevard stop. Eventually, two transit rail lines will converge there — the Expo and a planned route connecting to Los Angeles International Airport.

Dan Rosenfeld, the senior deputy in charge of development for County Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas, called the stop "the biggest opportunity" for development on the Expo Line.

Again, nothing is planned.

But he said he would like some current occupants of the site — including County Probation Department offices and some fast-food restaurants — to be moved to make way for new development.

Rosenfeld has also encouraged West Angeles Church of God in Christ, located near the station stop, to build a banquet hall or some other facility on a truss that would span the tracks.

"It would mark Crenshaw as a significant station and transfer point to the airport," he said, and it would be a bit of architectural theater for train passengers rolling through its portal.

"You could be like Titus returning to Rome," he said.

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