Twaddle, Bunk and Flub-Dub

How The Pasadena Blue Line Was Derailed Eighty Years Ago

Sure history repeats itself. As the Blue Line Authority forges ahead with the construction of the rail line from downtown Los Angeles, Pasadena City Hall is sorting out a new form of municipal governance that includes an elected mayor. But to really understand local transportation and the city government we have today, let's go back to the dawn of the Twenties in the City of the Roses.

by Tim Brick

It was the fourth and final debate in the local 1920 election. Voters nationally were considering the League of Nations, prohibition and Cox versus Harding, while Pasadena residents debated rival proposals for a municipal electric railroad to Los Angeles and the city manager form of local government.

Publisher Fitz E. Beach of the **Daily News** opened the evening's program at Lincoln School. "We're fighting the same battle over again," he declared, "that we fought over the light plant," referring to Pasadena's successful fight to wrest the electric utility from Edison. "We hear the same line of twaddle, bunk and flub-dub, of car miles and miles of cars, and smiles of miles and miles of smiles." The Pacific Electric Company, he charged, is robbing Pasadena residents of $1.5 million a year through high charges and slow service.

A businesslike form of government, not a municipal railroad, is what Pasadena needs, countered Ernest H. Lockwood, the realtor who headed the Chamber of Commerce's Better Government League. Pasadena, he declared, should adopt the practices of successful business concerns and do away with the politics in City Hall. Blasting City Commissioner John J. Hamilton who was waiting his turn to speak, Lockwood roared, "The bankers are the best friends this city has, and the man that says they are Southern Pacific hirelings is contemptible. It is the nearest approach to Bolshevism I know."

When given his chance, Hamilton, the fiery Commissioner of Parks and Public Buildings**,** lit into his opponents. "I will contribute to the nice, gentlemanly campaign our 'city manager' group of ninety-seven are carrying on by admitting that the only people here who want 'better government' are the owners of $150,000 homes," Hamilton said, referring to Lockwood's stated desire to maintain Pasadena as a haven for the rich. "The rest of us," he admitted with irony, "are really undesirable citizens. We ought, therefore, to abdicate in favor of the minority who know everything worth knowing and to vote down the railway bonds and vote up the city manager plan these newborn municipal experts thought up all in one evening, making the startling discovery that all the work of men who have been studying the real manager plan for years was no good, as doubtless some of them did not live in $150,000 homes."

The fireworks that night at Lincoln School were typical of the exuberance that characterized the Municipal Railroad Campaign of 1920. Two strikingly different alternatives were placed before Pasadena voters as to the future shape of their city, local government and the transportation system that would link them to the rest of Southern California. Their debate has remarkable relevance for Pasadena residents today.

On the one side were Hamilton, Beach and others who proposed the preservation of Pasadena as a diverse, residential community where citizens could find quick and inexpensive transportation to work in downtown Los Angeles via electric trains run by the city. They promoted municipal ownership of basic urban services as the road of democracy.

On the other side was the Better Government League of the Chamber of Commerce, led by Ernest Lockwood, which advocated residential exclusivity and the “Pasadena Form of Business Government." Their proposal called for a city manager and a city board of directors, qualified men with business skills who would replace the politicians running the city.

The public ownership movement that Hamilton and his allies represented was a political crusade that swept the country in the early decades of this century. Citizens organized for municipal ownership of basic services to ensure that they would not be left to the mercy of unscrupulous businesses. In Pasadena the movement sunk deep roots during the sixteen-year battle with Edison that began in 1904 over the Light and Power Department. Cornelius Wellington Koiner, the general manager of the Light and Power Department and later city manager, established a national reputation as an advocate of Public Power, and the local utility was known as a model operation. Besides the water and power utilities, the city operated an electrical appliance sales and repair shop, a city farm and city housing.

The fierce battle with Edison foreshadowed the acrid dispute with the Pacific Electric system that provided streetcar transportation throughout Los Angeles. Henry Huntington's Big Red cars are remembered nostalgically by transit buffs, but the citizens of Pasadena grew increasingly disenchanted with the poor service provided by Pacific Electric, particularly after 1911 when ownership passed to the Southern Pacific Railroad.

The Pasadena Short Line, the first Pacific Electric route, began service in 1902. But then, as what has been called the most efficient urban train line of its time expanded in other directions around Southern California, Pacific Electric seemed to neglect Pasadena service. Routes were inadequate, maintenance ignored, and the cars painfully slow.

Critics also attacked Pacific Electric for excessive rates and numerous accidents, but they went beyond that. They claimed that the Southern Pacific was intentionally stifling growth in Pasadena by providing abominable service. Private ownership of the transit system, they maintained, resulted in “civic lassitude and dry rot."

A larger political motive seems to have been at work. Around the turn of the century, the Southern Pacific Railroad (SP) was a mammoth political power in California. Parlaying its enormous land grants and stranglehold over the transportation of people, food, and basic commodities into political influence, the Southern Pacific virtually ruled Sacramento. Slowly a reform movement arose to challenge their immense power. Hiram Johnson, an energetic district attorney from San Francisco, made breaking up the power of the SP the main thrust of his successful drive for governor in 1910. Pasadena residents, particularly the local Lincoln-Roosevelt Club, were instrumental in that campaign. So when train service to the City of the Roses deteriorated, Southern Pacific claimed it was due to insufficient revenues, but many Pasadenans laid it to plain retribution.

Transportation had long been a fascination for Pasadenans. In 1899 Horace Dobbins of Pasadena devised an ingenious plan to build an elevated bikeway of pine lumber and asphalt to Los Angeles. In that year he began construction of an elevated cycleway that went from the Green Hotel through Central Park to Raymond Hill in South Pasadena where it was to turn west, run diagonally to the Arroyo Seco, and then reach into Los Angeles. Dobbins’ cycleway never got beyond Raymond Hill, but at about the time dissatisfaction with Pacific Electric was becoming a prominent concern of Pasadenans, Dobbins announced the formation of the Pasadena Rapid Transit Company which would use the cycleway right-of-way for a train to Los Angeles. In 1913 Dobbins set out to sell bonds, but World War I undid his plans. Eventually the visionary sold his right-of-way to the city for $156,000, and a municipal electric railroad came to be seen as a real possibility.

This was a vibrant period in American history, and Southern California was among the most exciting places to be. Not only were Americans

confronted with World War I, but strong popular movements were challenging economic and political structures. On a national level, women's suffrage, the income tax and direct election of senators came about. In California, reforms such as the initiative, referendum and recall were established, and many cities municipalized their utilities. Socialists were a powerful force and almost elected a mayor in Los Angeles in 1911. Meanwhile business-oriented reformers pushed the regulation of commerce, privately owned utilities and a business approach to government.

By 1920 the battle over the kind of transportation system which would structure and link our cities was still unresolved. The privately owned Pacific Electric had an extensive system which spanned Southern California, but automobiles were emerging in a big way. Newspapers were filled with accident reports and ads and features about the marvelous new lines of cars being introduced. The police were still uncertain how to effectively manage traffic and cooperated with the Auto Club to form a “Vigilance Committee" of 75 prominent but unnamed citizens to deal with motorists who had a record of consistent offenses. A gas shortage led some to wonder if automobiles would last, but others contended that electric trains were a thing of the past, doomed to the same fate as horse and mule carriages.

The structure of local government was also hotly debated. Inefficiency, corruption, and political machines characterized many cities. The first attempt to structurally reform local government came with the “Commission" form in Galveston, Texas in 1901. This system provided for the direct election on non-partisan ballots of Commissioners who would serve as managers of major city departments, striking directly at political machines. Des Moines in 1908 added the initiative, referendum and recall and civil service procedures. In 1912 Pasadena adopted the commission form of government, Five full-time Commissioners were elected for four-year terms and paid $3,000 annually to manage the city departments.

Still powerful critics such as John H. Patterson of National Cash Register Company, George Eastman of Eastman-Kodak, and Harrison Gray Otis of the Los Angeles Times called for more efficient “business management" of local government. Their cry was for "more business in government." The form they proposed was the city manager form. The first example, in 1908, was Staunton, Virginia, the hometown of Pasadena’s C. W. Koiner.

At first the city manager was coupled with the commission form, but soon the desire for centralization of responsibility and power led to surrounding the city manager with public-spirited businessmen who would serve part-time as city directors or council members.

In this climate the municipal railroad campaign gelled in Pasadena. Some traced the movement to the earlier campaign to dethrone the Southern Pacific about 1910. Others said the initial discussions were held by the Pasadena Board of Trade, which later became the Chamber of Commerce, at the Hotel Maryland in 1914. In any case, it was a powerful issue from that time through the rest of the decade.

In 1919 the proposal reached the ballot for the first time. The municipal railroad plan received 61% of the votes cast in the highest turnout election to that date, falling just a few hundred votes short of the two-thirds necessary to authorize the project. City Commissioners who backed the project were very pleased with the vote, calling it historic. At that election, John J. Hamilton, the champion of the 1920 Municipal Railway Campaign, was elected Commissioner of Public Parks and Buildings.

For the next year and a half, Hamilton, who had been a member of the Board of Education and a County Supervisor, worked tirelessly for the train to Los Angeles. He was delegated responsibility by the Commission for the project and used all his energy and skill to ensure its success. But after the April 3, 1919 election, opposition surfaced which would lead to the undoing of the railway project, Hamilton's political career and the commission form of government in Pasadena.

Ironically the Board of Trade had supported John J. Hamilton's election. Prior to his election, Hamilton had met with the Board of Trade and agreed that Pasadena residents should have the opportunity to vote on which form of government they preferred -- a strong mayor with council, a city manager, or a commission structure. But after the

1919 election, there was turmoil within the Board of Trade. Business leaders began to fear this public challenge to private enterprise. They worried that a municipal railroad's cheap fares might erode their privileged community.

By the end of the year a recall campaign was taking shape, and some business leaders were willing to back it. Signatures were collected to remove Hamilton from office along with the Commissioner of Municipal Water Supply, M. H. Salisbury. The recall was initially pushed by city firefighters who were disgruntled because the City Commissioners had denied them a $15 a month increase. Their attorney even filed the signatures. Though the increase was subsequently granted, the recall went ahead. Vague charges of “usurping the power of the people" were thrown at Salisbury and Hamilton, who responded strongly. Salisbury branded the campaign as a "transparent attempt to have the governing body of the city turned over to a radical element." Hamilton charged that it was the enemies of the municipal railroad who were behind this attempt to discredit him. He pledged that they would not deter him from his belief in municipal development. Together they handily beat back the February, 1920 recall.

But in late July the Board of Trade presented a proposal for a charter change to establish the city manager form to the City Commission. The Commission voted not to place the proposal on the ballot, although John J. Hamilton voted for the measure. He felt the voters should be given five options in the upcoming November election: 1) the present commission, 2) the present form with three commissioners instead of five, 3) the city manager apparatus, 4) the mayor and council structure, and 5) a municipal railway.

One month later, the Board of Trade, which recently had reorganized and taken the name "Chamber of Commerce," announced that they were undertaking an initiative campaign to put the city manager form of government on the November ballot. The Better Government League and the Committee of 100, both Chamber groups, spearheaded the campaign.

Hamilton blasted the Chamber proposal as a "Southern Pacific fraud," designed to block the municipal railroad and to recall the entire City Commission. Hamilton urged the Commission to place the city manager proposal before the voters along with a $4.5 million bond issue to establish the Municipal Railroad. “Pacific Electric is murdering its service,” he declared. “The municipal project will be fiercely opposed by Big Business and will be resisted by the power of Pacific Electric." Commissioner Salisbury blasted Edison as well, but he refused to join the other Commissioners in calling for a municipal railroad vote because he felt the city's bonding capacity should be reserved for expanding the water system.

The campaign took on the intensity that has frequently characterized Pasadena politics through the years. It was waged in the newspapers and in the city's clubs, churches and schools. The Chamber sent out campaign workers door to door throughout the community. The Committee of 100 met each Friday for lunch at Rene's Restaurant where they charged each other up with energetic speeches about the abuses of politicians and harebrained schemes like the municipal railroad. “The City Commission has divided Pasadena into those serving the Southern Pacific and those serving the people," said Lockwood at one such meeting. “Such statements," he went on, "keep men of means from settling here." Another business leader complained that there was "as much of a political ring in Pasadena as in Chicago." Business leadership, they all agreed, would stop the bickering. John MacDonald, the president of the Chamber, decried the lack of brains at City Hall. "Business men," he declared, "will put over what is right and best for the city. We have a responsibility to serve."

The Chamber's proposal clearly was styled to limit the type or people who would be able to serve as the new City Directors. Instead of the $3,000 salary that full-time City Commissioners received, the new City Directors would receive a token $10 a meeting up to a maximum of $50 a month. The plan also called for seven directors, elected at large, who would retain broad powers of hiring and appointment.

The charter amendment drew strong criticism even from proponents of the city manager form of government. Former City Attorney J. S. Bennett, who was active in the Municipal League, a national advocate of the city manager form, stepped forward

as one of the strongest critics. “The amendment,” Bennett declared, “is a sham from beginning to end.” It was not a true city manager proposal, according to Bennett, because of two key elements: 1) it was designed to be unrepresentative and exclude working people, and 2) it tied the hands of the manager by vesting all executive authority in the hands of the city board of directors.

Commissioner Hamilton took the offensive with strong statements advocating municipal ownership, pointing to the accomplishments of the Light and Power Department. He charged his pro-manager opposition with being in the pockets of Southern Pacific and Edison.

The Chamber and the Committee of 100 did not dare attack the immensely popular municipal utility, which had just that year completed its takeover of Edison facilities in the city. But they repeatedly denied that they had received even one dollar from Pacific Electric or Southern Pacific. They challenged every assertion about the municipal railroad plan: its cost, its right-of-ways through South Pasadena and Los Angeles, the city's right to operate such a transit facility and the commission's ability to manage such an enterprise. At one point they even attempted to halt the election by seeking an injunction based on the “improper expenditure of city funds” to provide factual information they themselves had requested.

The **Star News**, which had endorsed the Municipal Railway in 1919, now moved to a neutral corner. “While we support the municipal ownership idea," the newspaper editorialized, "this is not the time." The paper called for direct election of the chief city official, whether city manager, mayor or commissioner, rather than the Chamber proposition.

In the November 2nd national election, conservative Warren Harding was swept into the White House. Locally, the municipal railroad plan was trounced: Yes - 3,987; No - 10,831. By a somewhat closer margin, Pasadenans chose the city manager with board of directors form of government: Yes - 6,553; No - 5,275.

The following April Commissioner John J. Hamilton did not bother to run for office. Only one of the old commissioners did, and he was soundly defeated.

When Better Government League president Ernest Lockwood learned that all seven League candidates were victorious and would become Pasadena's first Board of Directors, he smiled. “It is a triumph," he stated, “of sound business principles over political practices."

Afterword: The 1920 election established Pasadena’s current form of government. Until eight years ago, council members were referred to as City Directors and the mayor was the Chairman of the Board. While current Council Members are elected from geographic districts, their authority and compensation remain basically unaltered, and the elected mayor has little executive power.