The Proposals

Under BT710’s policy statement, the following would be implemented:

- the north freeway stub would be filled in and rebuilt with “complete streets” connections
- 35 acres devoted to new housing and commercial space
- the south stub would be converted to a boulevard, creating green space and an expansion of transit hubs
- the restoration of Arroyo Roza de Castilla, a nearby creek
- a north-south transit corridor to supplement the existing east-west transit lines, generating greater connectivity with the rest of the Metro system
- a light-rail line (LRT)
- upgrading the efficiency of the existing freeway.

While the tunnels would be the most expensive option to implement, the preliminary findings suggest that they may prove to be efficient in reducing traffic. Importantly, they would allow for the preservation of existing communities and buildings where other “build” options could involve displacement and demolition. The CBA also mentions the possibility of excluding trucks from the tunnels as well as instituting a toll, both of which would contribute to offsetting the cost of construction. Based on the MTA’s projections and analysis, the tunnel options may be the most beneficial (see figure 3).

Previous Research

Poole and Sugimoto (1995) identify several benefits of existing urban tunnels in Europe, positing that they relieve traffic congestion and reduce air emissions. They also lay out the features of successful European tunnels:

1. public-private partnership funding – requires less public funding
2. congestion toll pricing – requires less public funding, contributes to paying off public-private partnership
3. cars-only access – reduces the cost of construction, contributes to the safety of tunnels (LACMTA)
4. the MTA is actively considering implementing the second and third features. Poole and Sugimoto’s assertion that urban tunnels reduce air emissions is corroborated by a 2014 study on emissions impacts of tunnel filtration stacks in Australia performed by an advisory committee of the government of New South Wales. The study found that, if properly filtered, tunnel emissions have a minimal impact on the surrounding communities as compared to the existing air quality. This casts doubt on BT710’s assertion that building a tunnel would be ineffective and a source of increased air pollution.

Public Opinion

The tunnel option has grown increasingly popular among many affected residents (Weikel, 2015). Alhambra’s mayor, Barbara Messina, charges that it is only residents of wealthy cities like Pasadena who are vocally opposed to the freeway extension being built, given that the existing freeway was built across poorer neighborhoods with little resistance (Rysdahl, 2015). This suggests that BT710’s opposition to the tunnel proposal is rooted in an unwillingness to accommodate its construction within Pasadena city limits based on its perceived effect.

The freeway’s incompletion results in over 43,000 vehicles forced onto the surface streets of Alhambra daily, contributing to congestion and automobile (Rysdahl). BT710’s policy statement does not directly account for the negative health and environmental impacts caused to Alhambra. While BT710 representatives describe their policy as an innovative and sustainable solution to a long-standing issue, the group has been characterized as an unreasonable vocal minority with no interest in compromise (Weikel).

Discussion

The projected outcomes of BT710’s sustainability policy would certainly benefit Pasadena’s economy and environmental quality. Greater transit connectivity and bicycle access encourages residents to make fewer trips by car, reducing pollution, and the creation and restoration of green space demonstrates a valuing of nature. Constructing new housing and commercial space would likely serve as a significant boost to the local economy. In the group’s policy language, however, social equity seems to be considered an afterthought, especially in the context of property rights.

It is unclear how much input citizens have been offered in shaping BT710’s policy. The coalition is vague in suggesting where the proposed green spaces and transit hubs will be sited or whether the housing plan to construct will be affordable, all of which are issues intricately associated with social justice and community access. Depending on which elements of sustainability are prioritized, it is evident that the proposal could be transformed into a tool for a property conflict, which could, for instance, involve a dispute over the profitability versus the livability of housing prices. It is also evident from the literature that tunnels are not as destructive as BT710 portrays them, creating the possibility that the group is primarily opposed to the tunnel on the basis of its perceived costs and effects. While the tunnel proposal is not necessarily a sustainable solution, its construction would relieve lower-income cities surrounding Pasadena, like Alhambra, while allowing communities to remain intact. A compromise between the tunnel option and a version of BT710’s policy that more thoroughly accounts for social equity could strike the best possible balance between economic, social, and environmental concerns, compared to either of the existing proposals alone.

Conclusion

While BT710’s policy is environmentally and economically sustainable, its de-emphasis of social issues and the broader context it exists in suggest that the proposal is motivated by NIMBY-ism rather than by a desire for sustainable development, as the group claims it to be. Many of their objections to the MTA’s tunnel option are tenuous, given that both research and public opinion are favorable of urban tunnels, but further research should be conducted regarding how such an undertaking would be impacted by fault line activity and underground streams. The matter of to what extent BT710’s policy and the tunnel proposal can coexist should also be investigated, as well as the feasibility of the MTA’s tunnel proposal and whether the group has truly considered how much input citizens have been offered in shaping BT710’s policy.