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Decision No. 75762

BEFORE THE PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION OF THE STATE OF CALIFORNIA

In the Matter of the Application of the CITY OF LOS ANGELES, a municipal corporation, to construct YARNELL STREET at grade across the tracks of the Southern Pacific Company's El Paso Line.	Application No. 49455 (Filed June 12, 1967)

Roger Arnebergh, City Attorney, by Charles E. Mattson, for applicant.
Randolph Karr, for Southern Pacific Company, protestant.
George W. Miley and William E. Sherwood, for Department of Public Works, State of California, respondent.
Jerald E. Wheat, for County of Los Angeles; Frank W. Pine, for Industrial Association of San Fernando Valley; and G. R. Mitchell, for Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers; interested parties.
William L. Oliver, for the Commission staff.

O P I N I O N

The City of Los Angeles (City) seeks authority to construct Yarnell Street at grade across the tracks of the Southern Pacific Company's (SP) El Paso Line. Appendix "A" attached hereto is a diagram showing details of the proposed crossing.

Public hearings were held before Examiner Robert Barnett in Los Angeles between October 30, 1967 and January 20, 1969. On the latter date the matter was submitted subject to

the filing of concurrent briefs within forty-five days after receipt of transcript and reply briefs within thirty days after the filing of the concurrent briefs. Briefs having been filed, the matter is ready for decision.

At the present time the area north of San Fernando Road to be served by the proposed crossing is largely undeveloped, except for a County Juvenile Hall facility in the northwest quadrant of the area. The remaining area between Bradley Avenue and the railroad tracks is zoned for industrial use and is presently olive groves. The area generally north of Bradley Avenue is residential and agricultural. The streets in the area are generally unimproved. Yarnell Street south of Bradley Avenue is unimproved. It is proposed to improve Yarnell Street from San Fernando Road to Bradley Avenue. The area south of San Fernando Road in the vicinity of the grade crossing is devoted to industrial use by the Department of Water & Power and the Metropolitan Water District.

The SP, the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers, and the staff oppose the construction of this grade crossing.

The City's Evidence

Witnesses for the City testified that Yarnell Street is designated as a secondary highway on the master plan of highways and freeways. It is the only north-south master plan highway in the community of Sylmar between Roxford Street on the east and Balboa Boulevard on the west. The proposed grade crossing would connect Yarnell Street with San Fernando Road, and the improvement

would establish continuity for local traffic in a corridor of approximately 410 acres. It would be 66 feet in width and would be located 31 feet north of the north curb line of San Fernando Road. San Fernando Road presently runs southerly of and parallel to the SP tracks. A grade crossing at Yarnell Street would enable traffic northerly of the tracks to cross to San Fernando Road. The area northerly of the tracks is presently without major street access to the City of San Fernando, which city is about four miles southeasterly of the Yarnell Street traffic corridor. The area without local street access includes an existing Los Angeles County Juvenile Hall facility, 65 acres of industrially zoned property adjoining the Juvenile facility, and approximately 300 acres of residential property that is only partially developed at the present time.

The Juvenile Hall facility employs about 425 persons and houses about 433 juveniles. These persons, plus about 115 daily visitors, generate a daily traffic of about 585 vehicles. In addition, an average of 70 employees' and visitors' vehicles park on San Fernando Road and the occupants of those cars walk across the tracks to get to the Hall. This creates danger for those persons and the railroad. Parking facilities at the Hall are adequate to handle all persons visiting the Hall plus those who now park outside.

The Sylmar area involved herein has the potential of the highest rate of employment growth in 16 study areas in the Los Angeles portion of a San Fernando Valley traffic study for

the 1965-1985 period. The population growth potential of the Sylmar area ranks third in the same 16 areas for the 1965-1985 period. The difficulty of finding a direct entry into the Yarnell Street tributary corridor, without the benefit of a railroad crossing, will curtail the development of valuable acreage to its highest and best use notwithstanding its attractive location and close proximity to the junction of the proposed Foothill Freeway and the Golden State Freeway.

Roxford Street, about one-half mile easterly of the proposed grade crossing, is at this time the only available surface street grade crossing in the general area. The proposed grade crossing is an ideal place in which to alleviate a critical traffic circulation problem. The possible construction of a road northerly and parallel to the tracks connecting at Yarnell Street and Roxford Street would not affect the need for a railroad crossing at Yarnell Street. Subdivision of property in this area should not occur unless there are at least two or more means of access out of the area. The cost of the proposed grade crossing is approximately $220,000; the cost of an underpass is estimated at about $1,000,000.

Staff and SP Evidence

Witnesses for the staff and the SP indicated that the greatest percentage of existing vehicle traffic in the Yarnell Street area originates from and desires to go towards the Los Angeles civic center via the Golden State Freeway. They now do this via the Roxford Street interchange and the Foothill

Boulevard entrance on the Golden State Freeway near existing Balboa Boulevard. The greatest amount of traffic generated in the Yarnell Street area is from the Los Angeles County Juvenile Hall which has its only entrance on the south end of Filbert Street. A November 1966 traffic count indicated 1,056 vehicles per day entered and left the Hall. Yarnell Street, during the same period, carried 312 non-Juvenile Hall-bound vehicles.

A new freeway, the Foothill Freeway, is presently under construction in the area and will interchange with the Golden State Freeway westerly of the proposed crossing. There will be an entrance and exit to the Foothill Freeway from Yarnell Street. The Foothill Freeway is expected to be opened by 1972, about the same time as the proposed grade crossing would be opened if it were authorized. Studies indicate that less than 700 vehicles a day would be interested in using the proposed crossing until the Foothill Freeway is completed. At that time it would be beneficial for most of those vehicles to use that freeway.

In Los Angeles County, the SP Line that extends from Bakersfield to Los Angeles is a single-track main line over which trains operate in both directions by timetable, train orders, and automatic block signals. The proposed grade crossing is at the Sylmar station, which station has a siding 7,974 feet long that is capable of holding a train having approximately 144 cars. The Sylmar siding is the last point prior to entering

the Los Angeles yards, some 19.3 miles away, that is essentially free from street crossings at grade. Roxford Street, at the east end of the siding, crosses at grade, but this cuts off only a negligible part of the siding. The siding at San Fernando, 2.6 miles east of Sylmar, holds 94 cars but has been discontinued, as far as meeting or passing trains is concerned, due to many grade crossings and the complaints of local government and motorists. A standing train would block most of the crossings in the town of San Fernando. The Pacoima siding, 1.6 miles east of San Fernando, has a capacity of 75 cars, which is not adequate to hold the average train operated on this line. The siding also has two major grade crossings that pass through middle parts of it which again discourages its use for meeting or passing purposes. The Sun Valley siding, 4.5 miles east of Pacoima, has a capacity of 87 cars, but it also is inadequate in length and has major street crossings.

The nearest siding west of Sylmar is at Newhall. This siding is located on a 2.20 percent ascending grade eastward and has caused difficulty to eastward trains having full tonnage. Many of these trains have broken in two while trying to start. Crews of eastward trains, moving against opposing superior trains by timetable schedule, prefer to stay at Saugus, the next siding westward of Newhall and about six miles from Sylmar, rather than take siding at Newhall, if they don't have sufficient time to properly clear an opposing train at Sylmar. There is also difficulty in getting into and out of the Newhall siding.

For these reasons, train dispatchers will not generally cause trains to meet at Newhall. The Newhall siding is used only about once every two days.

Train speed at Sylmar is restricted to 40 MPH for both freight and passenger trains moving west. Train speed for eastward passenger trains is 40 MPH and 25 MPH for freight trains. The maximum allowed speed of 40 MPH is due to two curves which are located one on each side of the proposed crossing. The 25 MPH speed limit for eastward freight trains is necessary due to a descending grade. The Sylmar siding curves have high earth banks which obscure visibility for trainmen. The curve west of Yarnell Street is spanned by two overhead structures of the Golden State Freeway. These structures further restrict visibility on the inside of the curve.

SP, during 1964, extended the Sylmar siding 2,120 feet west and thereby increased its capacity from 104 cars to 144 cars. The new extension was placed in service July 27, 1964. This project was undertaken to alleviate congestion at San Fernando, Pacoima, and Sun Valley, and also to eliminate the blocking of Roxford Street which crosses the Sylmar siding approximately 450 feet from the east switch fouling point.

Trains do not operate across this crossing at scheduled times. The Sylmar siding is used an average of three times a day. Because of the frequency and the length of the trains going over the proposed crossing (about 20 unscheduled movements a day) in the opinion of the engineers who studied this crossing the crossing

would be useless during unscheduled periods due to standing trains occupying the crossing. Such periods have exceeded three hours a day.

Engineering witnesses testified that it would be impractical to extend the Sylmar siding for the same distance westerly of the proposed grade crossing that now exists between Roxford Street and the proposed grade crossing because such an extension would require the extended siding to be built on a 2 percent grade which, in their opinion, is a dangerous grade from which to start a train. Also, the curvature of the siding would dangerously impair visibility for the train crew. Trains starting on such a grade have a tendency to break in two. The most practical way to start a train on such a grade is to back it down to a level ground, in this case, blocking the proposed crossing. However, this backing up of a train is in itself a dangerous movement and creates the possibility of a break-in-two. If the siding was extended westerly, the SP might have to put on helper locomotives as a safety measure to ensure that trains on the siding do not break in two. The cost of such helper locomotives is estimated to be $180,000 a year. The cost of moving the siding westerly is at least $165,000.

Discussion

In order to avoid delays to vehicular traffic when a train blocks a crossing, often the train crew cuts the train in half so as to permit vehicles to cross the tracks. This is a time-consuming and often hazardous undertaking. The City

recognizes this and admits that it would be impracticable to cut a train at the proposed grade crossing because of the large amount of time involved in such operation. The City proposes as an alternative that the siding be extended further to the west in order to provide facilities for train meets and passes. The City argues that the SP is contemplating extending the Sylmar siding westward in the future, so why not now? The City ignores the fact that the SP's extension plan is nebulous; has no target date; is only one of a number of alternate proposals to take care of increased traffic, such as double-tracking the main line; will involve the hazards of operating trains on a 2 percent grade; and most importantly, will require the use of track easterly of the proposed grade crossing thereby causing the crossing to be closed for long periods of time, just the situation the City wishes to avoid by suggesting an extension of the siding westerly.

The testimony on this record convinces us that to extend the siding westerly would increase the hazards of operation of trains that have to take the siding. The obstructed view that would be caused by the extended siding, the hazard of a break-in-two upon starting a train on the siding, and the possible need of helper locomotives to get trains up the grade convince us that no westerly extension of the siding should be permitted, absent a stronger showing than on this record.

The City argues that the grade crossing should not be rejected merely because existing traffic may not need it. The City asserts that because of insufficient grade crossings in the area, surface street access is inadequate and consequently development of the area is retarded. In the City's opinion freeways do not provide the surface street access needed for normal development. Considering the many alternate routes into the Sylmar area, present and under construction, the City's "for want of a nail" argument is not particularly persuasive. Moreover, in our opinion, the special need for the Sylmar siding as now constructed to facilitate railroad operations in this vicinity outweighs any need for a new grade crossing.

Further, we are not persuaded that there is a need for a grade crossing at Yarnell Street. Traffic is not particularly heavy at present and for the most part is freeway-bound, away from the proposed crossing. At this time it appears to us that the opening of the new Foothill Freeway on- and off-ramps at Yarnell Street will adequately meet the needs of vehicles going in and out of this area, and will spur industrial and residential development. This application is premature. When the Foothill Freeway is opened and new traffic patterns are established in the area, we will be in a better position to judge the need for a grade crossing at Yarnell Street. At that time we can reconsider the railroad safety problems involved in relation to the need for a new grade crossing.

Findings of Fact

1. A new freeway, the Foothill Freeway, is presently under construction in the vicinity of the proposed grade crossing and will interchange with the Golden State Freeway westerly of the proposed crossing. There will be an entrance and exit to the Foothill Freeway from Yarnell Street. The Foothill Freeway is expected to be opened by 1972, about the same time as the proposed grade crossing would be opened if it were authorized. Studies indicate that less than 700 vehicles a day would be interested in using the proposed crossing until the Foothill Freeway is completed. At that time it would be beneficial for most of those vehicles to use that freeway.

2. The proposed grade crossing is at the Sylmar station, which has a siding 7,974 feet long that is capable of holding a train having approximately 144 cars. The Sylmar siding is the last point prior to entering the Los Angeles yards, some 19.3 miles away, that is essentially free from street crossings at grade. Roxford Street, at the east end of the siding, crosses at grade, but this cuts off only a negligible part of the siding. The Sylmar siding has curves with high earth banks which obscure visibility for trainmen. The curve west of Yarnell Street is spanned by two overhead structures of the Golden State Freeway. These structures further restrict visibility on the inside of the curve. Trains do not operate across this proposed crossing at scheduled times. The Sylmar siding is used a possible average of three times a day. Because of the frequency and the length of the

trains going over the proposed crossing (about 20 unscheduled movements a day), the crossing would be useless during unscheduled periods due to standing trains occupying the crossing. Such periods have exceeded three hours a day. To cut the train in order to open the crossing would often take more time, and block the crossing for longer periods, than if the train was not cut. In addition, cutting a train on this particular siding is a hazardous operation.

3. It is impracticable and hazardous to extend the Sylmar siding westward because the extension would be on a two percent grade, which is a dangerous grade from which to start a train.

4. The SP requires a siding of about 8,000 feet in order to properly operate its trains between Newhall and Los Angeles. The Sylmar siding is the only siding between Newhall and Los Angeles which fulfills this need and does not block grade crossings for inordinate lengths of time.

5. The proposed grade crossing would substantially impair the operation of the railroad.

6. There is sufficient access to the Juvenile Hall facility and the surrounding area by way of the Golden State Freeway, Roxford Street, Foothill Boulevard, and the soon to be opened Foothill Freeway.

The Commission concludes that the application should be denied.

O R D E R

IT IS ORDERED that Application No. 49455 is denied.

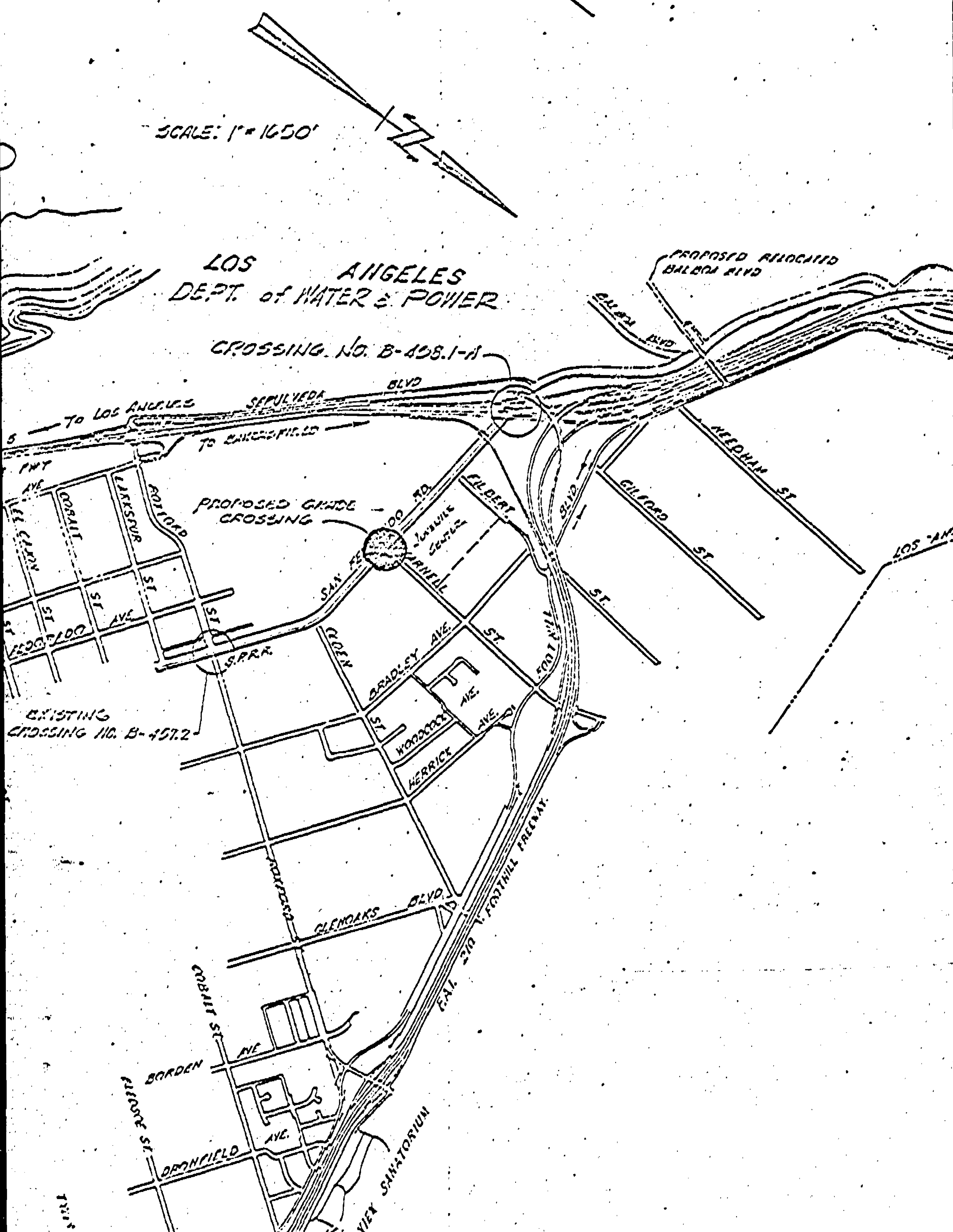
The effective date of this order is twenty days after the date hereof.

Dated at San Francisco, California, this 10th day of JUNE, 1969.

President

Commissioners

Commissioner A. W. Gatov, being necessarily absent, did not participate in the disposition of this proceeding.


SCALE: 1" = 1650'
LOS ANGELES
DEPT. of WATER & POWER
PROPOSED RELOCATED
BALBOA BLVD
CROSSING NO. B-458.1-A
SEPULVEDA BLVD
TO LOS ANGELES
TO BAKERSFIELD
NEEDHAM ST
GILFORD ST
PROPOSED GRADE
CROSSING
SAN FERNANDO RD.
GILBERT
FOOTHILL BLVD
LARKSPUR ST
COBALT ST
BRADLEY AVE.
WOODCOCK AVE.
HERRICK AVE.
EXISTING
CROSSING NO. B-457.2
S.P.R.R.
GLENOAKS BLVD.
FOOTHILL FREEWAY
BORDEN AVE
COBALT ST
ALMETZ ST
VIEW SANATORIUM

APPENDIX "A"