

A gondola from Union Station to Dodger Stadium? It could happen by 2022, Mayor Garcetti says

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A rendering shows a gondola car carrying passengers from Union Station to Dodger Stadium. (Aerial Rapid Transit Technologies LLC)

Thousands of baseball fans have thought longingly of visiting Chavez Ravine without idling in snarled, rush-hour traffic in a car or on a bus, sometimes missing the first pitch.

Now, a company funded by former Dodgers owner Frank McCourt has proposed a possible solution: a gondola lift that would whisk passengers from Union Station to Dodger Stadium by air in five minutes.

It's an unorthodox proposal in a city where big ideas often flare up and die out — like a similar pitch for an aerial system to the Hollywood sign. But this time, backers say, the plan is for real.

“I am absolutely confident that this will happen,” Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti told reporters Thursday. “It’s not actually crazy. It may seem like that because in Los Angeles, we don’t have this. But this exists in over a dozen cities around the world.”

Once relegated to ski resorts, gondolas are having something of a transportation moment. They have become a tourist attraction in Taipei and London. And in more than a dozen South American cities, such systems have become a critical transit link between commercial centers and mountainous regions once connected only by congested, winding roads.

In the United States, the systems are in use on New York's Roosevelt Island and in Portland, Ore., where a cable car carries commuters between a waterfront neighborhood and a university.

The craggy topography of Elysian Park has long presented a challenge to transportation planners and Dodgers fans alike. But those hills are perfect for a gondola line, which could easily scale inclines that defeat buses and light-rail lines, supporters say.

The gondola line, which could ferry passengers above the traffic-choked 110 Freeway, is one of several major infrastructure investments proposed in Los Angeles County that would not be built by Metro or funded by taxpayers. (Another? Elon Musk's tunnel project, currently awaiting environmental clearance from the city of Los Angeles.)

The company proposing the system was founded by McCourt's son Drew. The gondola project is directed by Martha Welborne, Metro's former chief planning officer.

Frank McCourt's investment firm would fund a portion of the project's estimated \$125-million cost and would seek private financing for the remainder. McCourt sold the Dodgers in 2011 but retained half interest in the 130 acres of parking around the stadium, where the line would reach its terminus.

In a prepared statement, the Dodgers called the gondola "an important and innovative project" that would improve the fan experience and remove cars from neighborhood streets.

The firm is seeking Metro's approval on the project and help with an environmental impact report and a community outreach process. The company also hopes to sign a lease agreement to build a gondola stop at Union Station.

The company would reimburse Metro for costs associated with environmental review and public hearings, project officials said.

In Chavez Ravine, the gondola would probably stop near the downtown gate, on the southeastern side of the stadium.

Operators would charge a fare that would be cheaper than parking at Dodger Stadium — currently about \$20 — but the exact amount has not been set, officials said. Garcetti said it would be "affordable to everyday folks."



A rendering shows passengers getting off gondola cars at Dodger Stadium. (ARTT LLC)

On game days, hundreds of cars heading to Chavez Ravine jam surrounding streets, causing traffic tie-ups and parking headaches for Echo Park residents.

Currently, the only mass-transit option to Dodger Stadium is an express bus operated by Metro, which uses dedicated bus lanes on Sunset Boulevard. Garcetti said the gondola would supplement, rather than replace, bus service.

“It’s also another 5,000 people that can come without having to be in a vehicle, even that shuttle bus,” Garcetti said. The bus “moves relatively quickly, but it’s still on the road, it’s still the victim of some traffic. This is a quicker, smoother ride.”

The gondola would be most likely to succeed if the Dodgers, Metrolink and Amtrak work to provide late trains for fans who live outside the city, said Sarah Catz, a research associate at UC Irvine’s Institute of Transportation Studies and a founding board member of Metrolink.

At Angels games, Metrolink holds one train in each direction until after the final out. After Dodgers games, however, there is no scheduled Metrolink service from Union Station past 7 p.m. to Orange County, past 8 p.m. to Ventura County and past 10 p.m. to the Inland Empire and Antelope Valley.

“If fans want to stay for an entire game, an automobile is typically what they use to get home,” Catz said.

On days when games weren’t in session, Garcetti said, the bubble-like gondola cars could serve as the backdrop for first dates, nights out with friends and marriage proposals.

“Los Angeles is a gorgeous city,” Garcetti said. “It lays out at night like this bed of jewels. This isn’t something that’s just about Dodgers games.”

Under the Dodgers’ 2012 sale agreement, the land surrounding Dodger Stadium is jointly controlled by McCourt and the team’s current ownership. The Dodgers will not be required to contribute to the financing of the gondola, Welborne said. Though lenders might be more receptive to finance a gondola that goes to Dodger Stadium 365 days a year — rather than just on 81 home-game dates — Welborne said development of the stadium site is not necessary to make the project financially viable.

“No development plans are proposed,” she said.

The firm would need to acquire some right-of-way in the Chinatown area to build the support posts for the gondola wires and to secure the air rights to the space above some buildings. Acquiring land is often one of the most expensive — and contentious — parts of a transportation project.

Still, Garcetti said, that isn’t a concern. The project takes up little space on the ground, and it would be possible to build a route from Union Station that would not go above houses or businesses, perhaps through Los Angeles State Historic Park.

In other cases, he said, the gondola wires would be high enough to avoid air rights above buildings.

That’s not a process that has always gone smoothly. When the Portland aerial tramway opened a decade ago, some residents sued. A man who lived beneath the route in view of passengers hung a banner from his house that used an expletive to deride the tramway.

Project supporters hope public outreach can start by the end of the year, with final decisions on routes and stations in 2019 or 2020. The system could begin service by opening day in 2022, Garcetti said, well ahead of the 2028 Summer Olympics.

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4:25 p.m.: This article was updated with more context about urban gondola systems.

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