

Bite the Bullet Train

What is the nonsense about the California bullet train? It started in 2008 with California Proposition 1A that allocated 9 billion for the California High-Speed Rail Authority to build the core elements for the Los Angeles to San Francisco corridor. This proposition deceived the voters about the prospective outcome, and then proceeded to enrich the people who wrote the proposal, supported the project, and are now managing it. Somehow the original project has become the "train to/from nowhere" which does not benefit the majority of people in California.

As was pointed out during the election campaign by the opposition, there was no way the project could be built for the 9 billion proposed even with federal subsidy. There is also currently no possibility to support fare-paid operation of the system as specified in the original proposal. Even now, the proposed end-to-end time is very unrealistic. The initial contracts were for the lowest cost part of the project through the flat central valley and the current financing has not allocated the contracts to build the final segments to the proposed end points of Bakersfield and Merced. The information provided online by the project management does not realistically look at the possible options for the future.

In the South, the major population centers of Los Angeles and San Diego are likely to be disenfranchised due to the high cost to build the segment from Bakersfield to Los Angeles. The original rail line from Sacramento built in the 1870s had to go a long way around the mountains through Tehachapi, by Palmdale, down the curvy Soledad Canyon, and through the longest tunnel in the world at the time just to get to Los Angeles in 1876. That proposed routing has high grades through difficult terrain where it is very expensive to build high speed trackage. The shorter route directly over the Ridge Route is not even under consideration due to steep mountains. Geologic fault lines add to the cost and risk. The right-of-way acquisition has been far over budget for all aspects of the project and is expected to be very high in the Los Angeles County area with current estimates of 5000+ properties required depending upon the specific route selected.

In the North, the proposed new route goes through Gilroy and then eastward through the Pacheco Pass and by the San Luis Reservoir toward Merced. This long routing also has costly difficulties with grades and right-of-way procurement. There is no previous rail construction along this route to provide a routing basis. Other current projects in the North include a 2 billion project just to electrify the existing CalTrain rail line from San Francisco to San Jose (but not as far as Gilroy). That line was supposed to connect eventually with the remainder of the high-speed rail project to the Central Valley. Also, the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) System is extending the Hayward line through San Jose and around to Santa Clara where it will connect with CalTrain. Service improvements are needed on the underutilized Altamont Corridor Express (ACE) from San Jose to Stockton. These smaller projects are a better use of transit funding to benefit the local residents.

For the bullet train, there should be more emphasis on the high environmental and economic cost of construction rather than the issues of environmental efficiency after project completion. Electric power can be relatively clean, but that is just power taken away from other uses. The entire high-speed rail project literature is not based on well-conceived economics, but rather inaccurate travel projections into the future. In the modern virtual world, people will be traveling less between cities in California while also preferring smaller group travel. The California elected government seems to have lost control of the staff and project. Since there was a ballot measure to begin the project, there should now be a ballot measure to cancel it. If that is not an option, then the government should design a proper termination for this project of unrealistic economic expectations.

On the proposed rail map, I do not understand the dashed purple line on the map from Palmdale to Las Vegas that goes through desert areas of minimal population. My knowledge of rail systems indicates that passenger traffic from cities along the route is the key to success.

