People have gotten the notion that California is going to build high speed rail comparable to Western Europe or East Asia. Nothing of the sort is about to happen.

High-Speed Rail (HSR) predominantly serves line-haul trips between endpoint metropolitan areas. There are usually very few stops enroute. The majority of HSR mileage is built on an all-new alignment as straight as possible; not shared with other rail operations. Close to terminal cities, European and Asian HSR do share short stretches of track with other rail services (freight, local commuter, etc.) and operate at reduced speeds. In virtually every case, however, HSR diverges as easily as possible from shared tracks to begin high-speed operations on its own exclusive right-of-way. The sooner HSR leaves shared-use segments, the greater the high-speed mileage is relative to the length of the trip.

The proposed California HSR will not have an exclusive alignment for the majority of its mileage. The only exception is an east-west transition from Gilroy to just south of Merced. The only exception is an east-west transition from Gilroy to just south of Merced. The project shares commuter tracks for the last 77 miles into downtown Los Angeles, instead of the HSRA plan to connect to Metrolink at Lancaster (77 miles from Los Angeles).

The alignment proposed in this article is about 90 miles shorter than that proposed by the HSRA and its plant consultants. This will enable trains to achieve the target 2 hour 40 minute end-to-end schedule time, in turn enabling trains to be a competitive alternative to both flying and driving. The HSRA's own PR admits that the first 78 miles of its chosen route from San Francisco to Gilroy will take most of an hour. That leaves just 1 hour and 50 minutes to cover the remaining 390 miles. This mileage includes passenger trains on temporary railways with lower speed curves through the San Joaquin Valley, a long circuitous path over the Tehachapi mountain range, and shared tracks at reduced speeds for 77 miles into Los Angeles.

The HSRA plan involves shipping trains in a twenty-first century rail operation onto a nineteenth century rail alignment. It is hard to believe that HSRA's alignment will have any 220 mph running at all. The HSRA plan involves shoe-horning a twenty-first century high-speed rail's mission of connecting the two capitals through a series of presumably high-speed segments, entirely separated from the popular Amtrak commuter network and more recently supported trains between Sacramento-San Jose and LA-San Diego would enable high speed trains to connect to little-used Palmdale airport. This diverges from high speed rail's mission of connecting the two endpoints of metropolitan areas. Wheel turning, cut-and-fill and bridge-and-tunnel work will be required to get over the mountain range, regardless of which route is chosen. A shuttle route over Tehachapi Pass (instead of the one over Tehachapi Pass with twice the linear mileage) would enable high speed trains to connect to Metrolink trains at Santa Clarita 35 miles from downtown Los Angeles, instead of the HSRA plan to connect to Metrolink at Lancaster (77 miles from Los Angeles).

No level of government (Feds, State, or local) possesses unlimited financial resources. The California State financial crisis, combined with foreseeable cost overruns on a project already shaping up as poorly planned, are likely to result in periodic suspensions of construction that would leave incomplete structures sitting half-finished in municipal yards for years.

California HSR needs to be brought back down to earth factually and physically. The Board of the California HSR has done the project a disservice by dictating a private agenda that is little more than drawing lines on a map to connect politically desired dots. The project’s cost is ever cost.

The HSRA plan cannot meet the target 2 hour 40 minute schedule.

by Anthony E. Waller

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