

Experts Revive Altamont as HSR Option

MTC RIDERSHIP PROJECTIONS CHALLENGED

By David Schonbrunn

Three citizen groups working together filed a series of reports in late April as comments on the Revised Draft Bay Area Central Valley Program Environmental Impact Report, which the High-speed Rail Authority (HSRA) intends to use to replace the defunct 2008 EIR.

One of the reports, authored by the French rail engineering firm Setec Ferroviaire, finds the Altamont route technically feasible, thereby preventing the Authority from using the legal tricks it employed in the past to avoid objective consideration of Altamont.

The California Rail Foundation, the Transportation Solutions Defense and Education Fund, and the Planning and Conservation League filed the expert reports in an attempt to overturn the selection of the Pacheco Route as a preferred alternative, despite its negative environmental impacts upon species in the Hamilton Range and Pacific Flyway.

The HSRA's predecessor agency, the California High-Speed Rail Commission, had found the Altamont route (the I-580 Corridor) to have higher ridership, lower environmental impacts and lower construction costs than the Pacheco Route. Nonetheless, for the past ten years, the Authority's choice for connecting the Central Valley to the Bay Area has been the Pacheco Route.

The Authority did not even evaluate the Altamont Route in its 2005 Statewide Program EIR. Legal pressure forced the Authority to compare the two routes in its 2008 Program EIR, which was overturned after a challenge by the groups. As a result, the Authority has still not legally chosen which route its trains will take in getting from the Central Valley to the Bay Area. The Alternatives Analysis process now underway assumes a Pacheco Route, but that work is irrelevant if Altamont is chosen instead.

The Setec Ferroviaire consultant team, with major experience designing and managing construction of high-speed rail lines in France, found in its report that "The Altamont route will provide an improved rail corridor between the northern San Joaquin Valley and the Bay Area to support passenger service between the Bay Area, the Tri-Valley area, and the Northern San Joaquin Valley. In addition, this route will offer a travel alternative that is competitive with the travel costs and time of auto, intercity bus and regional air modes. ... For the operation of a high-speed rail service, the route through Altamont has many more advantages than the Pacheco plan."

Expert evidence of feasibility will be crucial in preventing the Authority from again rejecting the Altamont Route. Environmentalists prefer the Altamont Route because it:

- Avoids the Grasslands Ecological Area, California's largest fresh water wetlands complex;

- Avoids inducing new sprawl in Santa Clara and Merced Counties;
- Provides attractive rail service linking the Bay Area, Stockton, and Sacramento, with most trips less than an hour;
- Addresses highway congestion on Interstates 80, 880, 580, and 680;
- Adds mobility between the Bay Area and the northern San Joaquin Valley;
- Generates much higher ridership than the Pacheco Route, because it serves the East Bay and the northern San Joaquin Valley, with 2 million more residents within 10 miles of stations.

On May 6, the three groups and two cities announced the filing of a legal action in Sacramento Superior Court seeking to reopen the Court's decision on their 2008 challenge to the Bay Area-Central Valley EIR issued by HSRA.

The petition is based on discovery of new facts in the case: the recent disclosure of details of the ridership and revenue analysis not previously made public by HSRA. The ridership projections used by the Authority as the basis of its selection of the Pacheco Pass route did not come from the ridership model that had been peer-reviewed and fully documented.

Instead, the final model was significantly different from the published one. A memo from the model developer, Cambridge Systematics, announced that the Metropolitan Transportation Commission, under contract to HSRA to manage the development of the model, had "elected not update the Task 5a report nor to include the final coefficients and constants in the final report."

The three groups, working with the Town of Atherton and the City of Menlo Park, contend that failure to disclose the actual numbers used in the ridership model deprived the public of the right to comment on the reasonableness of the model and its resulting projections. They are asking the Court to order HSRA to respond to comments about the flawed ridership modeling.

Hundreds of millions of dollars in environmental studies are now underway whose justification depends on the validity of the ridership projections. The Authority's Business Plan as well as its claim of profitable high-speed rail operation are based on the flawed model. The Business Plan findings that Merced, Gilroy and Anaheim interregional boardings equal or exceed those of Los Angeles are clearly unreasonable.

The groups hired a transportation consultant who reviewed the documentation and concluded that the final coefficients and constants were different from the published numbers in the model documentation and were invalid.

In his report, Norman Marshall of the Smart Mobility modeling firm wrote that "These numbers make absolutely no sense and cannot be justified by the model development process."

The documents filed with the Court are available on-line at:

www.transdef.org Click on the High-Speed Rail tab, then the Ridership Challenge tab to see the documents.

Setec designed the alignment for the 205 mph LGV-Est. Photo by Alain Stoll

