

Flawed Plan Blocks High Speed Progress

California needs a high speed rail system, but plans put forth by the High Speed Rail Authority will delay progress with years of environmental litigation, community opposition, change orders and project delay.

by Richard F. Tolmach

With breathtaking speed, the California Legislature passed a bond measure at the end of session in August that would put in place a mechanism to finance a California high speed rail line. SB 1856, packaged by Sen. Jim Costa and a bipartisan coalition of progressive legislators is by and large an admirable and far reaching piece of legislation with only a few minor technical flaws.

Despite this progress, actual plans for the line are anything but ready for prime time. Moreover, the cast of characters at California's High Speed Rail Authority (HSRA) does not inspire confidence that Californians will have bullet trains any decade soon. The HSRA Chairman, Rod Diridon, is best known for presiding over a rail project in San Jose which had among the longest delays and highest cost overruns of any new light rail line in North America. Once it opened, it had the lowest cost-recovery ratio of any rail line in California.

Diridon, highly identified with San Jose by reason of its railroad station bearing his name, has definitely put his mark on the high speed rail project. Although he currently denies this detail, for months he maintained that all trains on the high speed rail starter line would stop at Diridon station, an arrangement which would delay and inconvenience the vast majority of Californians who aren't going there. This detail of the plan is most onerous for residents of Sacramento, Stockton, Modesto, and the East Bay who get left out of the starter plan and won't have high speed rail serving their cities until some undetermined date years later.

The Authority's prime consultant, Parsons Brinckerhoff, has spent tens of millions of dollars in over 10 years of studies for the state, but has failed in all that time to come up with a politically attractive, buildable concept for high speed rail in California. Dubbed "the taxi drivers" by industry observers because its interminable studies keep the meter running, PB is famous for its multi-billion dollar plans for airport expansions and freeway double-decking projects, as well as its uncanny knack of having its hapless transit clients aim projects straight at foreseeable problems which later cause huge project overruns.

The problem was the La Brea Tar Pits on the Los Angeles Red Line, where Metro Rail was surprised to find gas and oil, serpentine formations on San Jose's Guadalupe Corridor light rail, where County Transit was surprised to find asbestos, a telephone switching center in Millbrae on the BART-SFO project where BART was surprised to run into fiber optics, interrupting phone and data service to 25,000 customers. Each of these discoveries cost the public many millions of dollars, but was quite profitable for the contractors.

Nobody who has been closely watching California's high speed rail planning has been surprised that instead of using Altamont, or another of the easily scalable

passes into the Bay Area, the project has a preferred routing aimed at the heights of Mount Hamilton and Henry Coe State Park, where predictable engineering difficulties and environmental opposition both provide immense opportunities for lucrative change orders and cost overruns. Problem tunnels are PB's most lucrative specialty. PB's endless Boston "Big Dig," its 50 percent underbid of the Seattle light rail tunnel and its role in the Hollywood cave-in show three possible scenarios that could be played out on even a grander scale on a project with a \$20 billion price tag.

Nor was anyone surprised when instead of doing a true alternatives analysis that would find an unobstructed path through the Central Valley for its 220 mph trains, the Authority's Mehdi Morshed wrote citizen advocates on June 14, 2002 to say that all "non-railway corridors through

the Central Valley have been eliminated from consideration at this time" and that the route would consist of the Union Pacific or the Burlington Northern Santa Fe through the middles of cities. Chairman Rod Diridon said we should think of the city center stations as airports. That's perhaps fitting, since the jet-like noise of 220 mph trains every ten minutes would make all residents of these cities feel like they are living at the end of the runway.

At its recent meeting in Fresno, Authority consultants changed their story yet again. They said they would instead loop around any town that poses a problem. With grain elevators, packing houses, and cement plants blocking the path typically every ten miles in our mechanically-laid out Central Valley, and with the three-mile turning radius required by 220 mph, the resulting route would wind like a sine

wave. This isn't good for passengers or trains. Actually it's a recipe for maximizing route mileage, motion sickness and equipment failure. Not coincidentally, the winding path proposal maximizes design constraints and future change orders.

Even more recently, apologists for the High Speed Rail Authority plan have said that trains would slow down for cities, not run through at high speed. Project insiders deny that they have any intention of doing this, but if trains were slowed, it would increase elapsed travel time by well over an hour, decimating projected ridership and destroying any financial justification for the project.

Successful builders of high speed rail lines in Europe and Japan chart straight routes that avoid intermediate cities and serve these cities with trains diverting from the high speed tracks to conventional rail lines. Citizen supporters of rail have tried to educate the Authority on this issue and others, but it is really too late to teach HSRA staff and leadership anything. It's now time to replace them with professionals who have actually built high speed rail lines.

Instead of wasting another decade by having HSRA bureaucrats run detailed engineering and environmental studies of high speed lines that cannot work economically, California should proceed in the way that Texas did, and solicit proposals from operators of high speed rail. Texas paid qualified high speed operators to produce bankable proposals, and ended up with two highly attractive alternatives. Only heavy lobbying by Southwest Airlines prevented the Texas line from being built, because the plan by a French and German consortium convinced both European and American investment banks of its merit.

For the banks to be convinced of the value of California rail bonds at this particular turn in our economic history, we will need a definitive case made by international rail experts, not by bureaucratic poseurs. For this to happen, the plan cannot be jiggered to produce change orders, cannot waste money on tunnels where surface track will do the job, and cannot aggrandize a particular city or pair of cities. For a California high speed rail plan to be accepted by financial institutions, it has to be reasonably determined to produce the best revenue stream with the least capital, and with the least engineering risks.

In the runup to the November 2004 ballot in which his measure will be considered by voters, Senator Costa would do well to convince the public that high speed rail is not just a bigger, faster Metro Red Line hole in the ground. The best way to do this is to close down the Authority's ill-considered planning activities, let the Parsons Brinckerhoff contract lapse, and obtain active proposals from successful high speed rail operators.

By the way, I cannot refrain from addressing those slight technical flaws in the bond act, although the French, Germans, Japanese or Spanish would be glad to point them out. The last minute revisions to lengthen travel times specified in the act were necessitated by a realization that the 2 hour 2 minute travel time between Los Angeles and San Jose is impossible, even with the latest technology, because of the distances and obstacles involved. The revised times 12 minutes longer are equally unlikely to be achieved. These flawed figures were provided to Senator Costa by HSRA and are yet another example of why the Authority's planning activities should be handed over to rail experts who actually have built and operated high speed service.

