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Community Voices

High speed rail a boon for Bakersfield

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The California High Speed Rail system, endorsed by the voters of Kern County and all of California, will be a great benefit to Bakersfield and Kern County. In his June 27 column ("Put brakes on high-speed rail") Ric Llewellyn raised several important questions about the system, but his comparisons were not founded on the best parallels.

The high speed rail network will cover metropolitan areas that contain around 80 percent of California. Unlike Llewellyn's characterization of "rail service to a few metropolitan areas," the network will serve the Los Angeles, Bakersfield, Fresno/Clovis, Merced and San Francisco metropolitan areas in the initial phase. At full build-out it will also serve the San Diego, Irvine/Long Beach, Stockton and Sacramento metropolitan areas.

Llewellyn claims "it's really going to cost us" to build high-speed rail. What he fails to mention is that expanding roadways and airports would cost us even more. To provide the same transportation capacity, roadway and airport expansions will cost around \$80 billion, according to state estimates, while the high-speed rail network will cost around \$45 billion. Private investors will likely contribute a substantial portion of the necessary funds. And by implementing the HSR project, California is going to receive billions of federal government dollars that would otherwise go to other states. A draft of the federal transportation bill currently being debated in Washington has \$50 billion set aside for a six-year period. Whatever the final number, it will likely be significant.

The idea that a rail service can make money is greeted with skepticism by Llewellyn, who assumes that high-speed rail will provide "Amtrak-like performance." This assumption is simply nonsensical. As Llewellyn points out, the Amtrak Capitols average around 43 mph and go from the Bay Area to Sacramento and lose money. However, Amtrak's Acela East Coast service averages only 72 mph yet has made an operating profit since 2001. The California system will average over 160 mph. High-speed rail trains will go over twice as fast Acela and four times as fast as the Capitols. Surely it will produce surplus greater than that of Amtrak's Acela.

Contrary to Llewellyn's characterization that there is no rail capacity issue in California, there is a huge capacity problem. It can be felt right in Bakersfield as every San Joaquin train heading south is forced to stop and transfer its passengers onto buses. Amtrak has repeatedly asked for train slots on the existing slow mountain passes between Bakersfield and Los Angeles, but has always been denied. The high-speed rail network will finally close this ridiculous gap in train service.

The land use impacts of high-speed rail are an important issue. Expanding roadways will require much more land than the high-speed rail tracks. In fact, for every two tracks of high-speed rail, approximately 12 lanes of roadway are required. Therefore, Llewellyn's advocacy for roadway expansion will require the consumption of much more

farmland. High-speed rail will redirect growth in the center of cities that otherwise would pave over farmland.

High-speed rail is truly an economic win for California -- good for the environment, good for agriculture and good for travelers.

Brian Stanke is a professional urban planner and executive director of Californians for High Speed Rail.