

Opinion L.A.

OBSERVATIONS AND PROVOCATIONS
FROM THE TIMES' OPINION STAFF

Blowback: Mend, don't end, California's bullet-train program

May 17, 2011 | 5:26 pm

Ryan Stern, who serves on the board of Californians For High Speed Rail and lives in downtown Los Angeles, responds to *The Times'* May 16 editorial, "[California's high-speed train wreck](#)." If you also have a bone to pick regarding a recent *Times* article, editorial or Op-Ed and would like to participate in *Blowback*, here are our [FAQs and submission policy](#)



The interstate freeway system is the mainstay of urban transportation in cities across America, including Los Angeles. But the first interstate construction project didn't happen in a city. It was a lonely stretch of road in central Missouri that received the first federal interstate funds in 1956. More money followed, and the system grew rapidly, connecting cities and creating jobs.

California's high-speed rail system -- for which the first tracks will be laid in the Central Valley, a plan *The Times* decries -- will follow a similar path of growth. Grass-roots supporters of the high-speed rail project can't wait to get from Los Angeles to San Francisco in less than three hours. That's why we are more concerned than almost anyone else in the state that this project be built efficiently. However, the proposals advocated by *The Times* would so severely weaken the voter-approved project that we would probably never see it built at all.

The Times' criticism of the Central Valley starting point misses some key points. This segment doesn't just connect small towns; it connects two large cities, Bakersfield (metropolitan population of 800,000) and Fresno (metropolitan population of 1.1 million). It's the cheapest place to begin construction while also creating tens of thousands of desperately needed jobs, providing an economic stimulus to the entire state. Perhaps most important, it will form the backbone of the statewide project, a functional first investment regardless of which section follows on the construction timeline.

Trains should go where the people are. That's why the choice of a Palmdale route was a sound decision. The Antelope Valley's population is projected to be about 1 million by 2020, when the trains would begin service. A station at Palmdale also allows for an easy connection to the proposed [bullet train to Las Vegas](#).

Of greater concern is *The Times'* call to defund the California High Speed Rail Authority, which oversees the project. The authority has a lot of engineering and design work to complete, and when former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger did not properly fund it, the group's ability to do community outreach was crippled and many communities along the route didn't get the information they needed. If the authority isn't fully funded this year, those problems will return, making it much harder to properly plan this project.

As to *The Times'* suggestion that we renegotiate terms with the federal government to postpone construction or allow the money to be spent on commuter trains instead, this is both unlikely and unwise. When governors such as Florida's Rick Scott and Wisconsin's Scott Walker made similar requests, the federal government refused them, ultimately redirecting billions of dollars to projects in other states. Congressman Jim Costa (D-Fresno) indicated last week that the federal government will likely not agree to these kinds of requests for redirecting California's high-speed rail money.

Nor should it. The point of high-speed rail is to connect the regions of our state, not cities within a single metro area such as Anaheim and L.A., which *The Times* identifies as a more appropriate first phase for this project. Bullet trains connect metropolises in Asia, Europe and the Northeastern U.S., serving both

local commuters and intercity travelers. The Times' suggestion could lead to a dismemberment of this visionary project.

We know that Californians still strongly support high-speed rail; they easily elected a governor who originally proposed such a project for California decades ago. Polls show continued backing for the project. We hope The Times will seek better ways to ensure that the project is finished, including advocating for more federal money. Let's work together to get this project built in its entirety instead of tearing it apart.

-- Ryan Stern

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Photo: An Acela high-speed train sits on the platform at New York's Penn Station. Credit: Jessica Rinaldi / Reuters

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GMAFB! What are the relative costs of the Central Valley boondoggle and upgrading the existing San Francisco - Los Angeles right of way?

Posted by: Andrew, Carmel, CA | May 17, 2011 at 06:01 PM



Thank you Ryan Stern for perfectly and neatly explaining and debunking many of the myths and misinformation that is out there. Great great op ed! THANK YOU. You speak for many many rational Californians

Posted by: Moy | May 17, 2011 at 07:39 PM



Lets just leave the 70 miles caltrain tracks alone and just have the High speed rail end at San Jose instead of bringing them to San Fransisco, another word have the High speed train run from L.A. to San Jose and get people to make connection with Caltrain and See how it goes and Lets Move on, would you people Wake up, Stand up, And Get some Balls!!

Posted by: Richard Peterson | May 17, 2011 at 08:07 PM



The voters of this state voted for a true HSR line from San Francisco to Los Angeles and not some truncated segment from LA to Anaheim or SF to SanJose or any other silly ideas being forced by Nimbys and others with special interests out to ruin this much needed system with its future benefits for our state

Posted by: YesonHSR | May 17, 2011 at 09:04 PM



Andrew, if you look at the current coast alignment, it cannot be routed there due to the curvature and would require even more property than this alignment. The Central Valley leg is a necessity. If running the first high-speed rail line in France through the country-side short of Paris was a boondoggle, then it would have never happened. Now of days, the line is near capacity, 30 years later. The costs would be higher since you would have to build quite a few new ROWs. The plan for the current system would use the Caltrain and Monterrey Highway ROW, follow near SR 152, then utilize current rail corridors into Los Angeles except for the tunneling required.

Posted by: political_incorrectness | May 17, 2011 at 09:08 PM



Andrew... It's not a boondoggle, it's real HSR system..at least it will be if there any politicians who can see beyond their reelections. So far as the coast route, it's all on the HSR website so go read it. 220mph trains don't do well along curvy routes built decades ago....and you think the Bay Area NIMBYs are bad, just

try putting HSR along a coastline. Jerry Brown tried it San Diego to LA in the 70s.

Richard. Nope, the voters went for LA to San Francisco and that's in the law now. Why exactly would you gut the system AND miss out on a generational chance to upgrade (and probably save) Caltrain? Where in the world does an HSR line stop short of a major metropolis and dump out the passengers onto a crowded, outdated commuter line?

Posted by: Jem | May 17, 2011 at 09:20 PM



If you are going to build a rail line, you need to START building where you will most likely have a segment that will actually have people that will use it. You don't start by building somewhere because its cheapest, you build where the utilization is likely to justify expansion and continuation.

What you DON'T do is build a disconnected segment that will exist primarily to provide jobs to the districts of the politically connected. That's just flushing money down the toilet.

To be frank, in all likelihood the trains will be underutilized because they will cost so much to run and the high speed element will not come as much into play for the simple reason they will need to make many stops along the way.

Posted by: Richard | May 17, 2011 at 09:52 PM



These trains will not be self supporting, creating yet another money leak for the state. Just what we need.

No amount of verbal gymnastics changes the economic reality of rail.

Posted by: skeptic | May 17, 2011 at 10:36 PM



HSR will be about as successful as the LV monorail.

Posted by: Digital 3D | May 18, 2011 at 01:33 AM



We need real HSR. The state has to be all in for it to be successful. The boondoggle suggested by the LA Times will only keep the freeways clogged.

My only nit to pick with Mr. Stern is that the Northeast does not have true HSR, and the Acela train pictured would only be considered an Express on a conventional line in places with true HSR. Real HSR service is faster door-to-door than driving or flying, for distances under 400 miles.

Posted by: BobMatthews | May 18, 2011 at 05:04 AM



Mr. Stern wants to keep his job and benefits, period.

Like many other government (taxpayer funded) projects, there is no plan or funding for maintenance, repair, replacement, infrastructure such as labor costs of operation, administration, advertisement, pensions, benefits, medical, dental, legal costs, etc., etc.

The is nothing but a political boondogle. It is a waste of money now and in the future. Stop the foolishness and funding. Use the money to pay off the debt or lower the annual budget.

More debt for our children and grandchildren.

Posted by: Tom | May 18, 2011 at 07:11 AM



A question I forgot to supporters. Name one, just one rail that actually makes a dime. Research Amtrak, Metrolink, Metrorail, etc. All lose money. All subsidized by on-going tax dollars.

Posted by: Tom | May 18, 2011 at 07:13 AM



I wholeheartedly agree with what Ryan Stern has to say here. One minor correction is in order, however. Unless Fresno had a mass expansion in population growth while I wasn't looking, its metro area population is just over a half-million and not 1.1 million as stated above. Fresno County population, on the other hand, is approximately 1 million.

Posted by: Alan Kandel | May 18, 2011 at 07:19 AM



Tom,

Thank you for showing your ignorance. Most high speed rail in the world turns an operational profit, including our own Acela, which is not even true high speed. If the construction costs are added in they do not. Please show me one highway which covers its maintenance and highway patrol costs, let alone construction or other capital costs with the fuel tax generated. Or show me a recently built airport which does not need government subsidy.

Posted by: Jack | May 18, 2011 at 07:47 AM



Jack:

Your spin holds no truth. Amtrak, Metrolink, Metrorail, etc. all lose millions each year, subsidized by taxpayers. Conduct simple fact checks on-line.

You cannot hide the truth. Tell us all what the plan is for on-going costs? - None....that's the truth. More political spin.

Posted by: Tom | May 18, 2011 at 08:29 AM



For all you folks--including the LA Times--who echo the Reason Foundation's standard "train to nowhere" talking point, you do realize an HSR is still a train on two steel rails? When an HSR train reaches the end of the Central Valley segment, it will be possible to couple to a diesel locomotive and continue to the Bay Area or Sacramento on the existing, albeit slow, line used by Amtrak's San Joaquin service? The California High Speed Rail Authority folks are pretty smart--they're already working out ways to provide interim services just like this. So "train to nowhere" is nonsense.

If you want to see this scenario in action, here's a video of Amtrak running a Swedish X-2000 (pushed by a diesel) and a German ICE (pulled) high speed train set on a demonstration run back in the 1990s.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4j1wvUIJyvs&feature=related>

Now here's that same exact German ICE train flying through a local station in Germany on a true HSR line:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YcBowx2xwTM&feature=related>

Everyone get it? HSR trains can go 200 mph. Or they can slow and run on normal train lines. So no "train to nowhere."

Posted by: OpenForum | May 18, 2011 at 08:30 AM



Tom,

You're right! Amtrak and MetroLink don't make money. But that's not high speed rail.

Let's try some video, shall we:

#1) Makes money (the French TGV on a demo run):

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NqxxTfGCiz0&feature=related>

#2) Doesn't make money (MetroLink/AKA a typical dorky, stone age American train):

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=94Gaa71s_h0&feature=related

#1 competes with airplanes. #2 is a commuter train. The California High Speed rail project is about building #1, not more of #2. Any questions?

Posted by: OpenForum | May 18, 2011 at 08:45 AM



Prudence demands we question how much HSR construction, operation and maintenance will cost us and our children. Folly, however, allows us to ignore how much more failing to build, operate and maintain HSR will cost. Building nothing will condemn California to economic stagnation while we burn imported, non-renewable fuel to crowd onto our clogged freeways and into our saturated airports. The expense of building, operating and maintaining new freeway and airport capacity to allow economic growth will make HSR costs look like chump change. As expensive as HSR is, we must build it in California; building nothing or expanding freeways and airports will cost much more.

Posted by: Angeleno | May 18, 2011 at 08:48 AM



I read your rebuttal with great interest and agree unequivocally with your well-reasoned argument and final plea!

Posted by: Joan E. Stern | May 18, 2011 at 10:08 AM



I just noticed that one of the commenters thought Mr. Stern was feathering his own nest because he serves on a rail board. To the contrary, Californians for High Speed Rail is a group of dedicated volunteers, who donate their services to help to achieve the visionary project that the voters back.

Posted by: Joan E. Stern | May 18, 2011 at 10:19 AM



The plan is for a statewide system. The Central Valley portion must be built to connect Los Angeles and SF eventually. Therefore, it makes perfect sense to start there, sidestepping some major issues, and allowing the project to gain momentum. And from a practical and political point of view, with so much of the backbone having been constructed, it would make it harder to walk away from the project when it comes time to finish the LA / SF connections and tackling the more difficult issues there. Wise from a project management and strategic point of view.

Posted by: GM | May 18, 2011 at 10:43 AM



I'm old enough to remember when any long car trip would take you through an endless series of small towns. It also meant being stuck behind slow moving trucks Dad would hope someday to be able to pass.

Our rail system is like the highway system before the interstates. There are endless slow downs to switch tracks, delays caused by slow moving freights, speed restrictions caused by less than optimum rails.

We as a nation invested trillions in building the interstate system and I would argue it has paid off handsomely. The government owns and maintains the highways and private industry provides the rolling stock.

I think a similar model should be considered for High Speed Rail. A system where both passenger and freight trains would have minimum speed requirements. Construction and maintenance would be taken on by the nation and the rolling stock provided by private industry. It is hard to argue with government providing a framework within which private industry can flourish. Both the airline industry and the internet would crumble without the overseeing hand of the government.

To state the obvious the future stretches out to eternity before us. The model we currently employ using one gasoline powered car per person for the majority of our travel cannot be sustained on any long term basis. The very fact that oil companies are willing to take the risk of drilling in mile deep water means easy cheap oil is a thing of the past. Continuing to rely on a dwindling resource to power our transportation needs is the height of foolishness.

Posted by: Lee Elliott | May 18, 2011 at 11:17 AM



Tom,

Ryan does not work for the railroad, so while he probably does want to keep his job and benefits, I don't think that has anything to do with the sentiments expressed in this article.

Posted by: Emily | May 18, 2011 at 11:28 AM



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Posted by: Emily | May 18, 2011 at 11:28 AM



The high speed train linking Paris to London was inaugurated with only the French portion ready which consisted basically of an extension of the Brussels line to the Channel tunnel. From there on the TGVs had to share the traditional tracks with busy commuter lines making the English portion very slow. However, with the top speeds reached in the French portion it'd make the trip still very quick. The same applies to the Central Valley idea. You get a long stretch of tracks where the trains can run at top speeds, connected to the existing commuter ones in the dense urban areas where it's costlier and more complicated to build (SJ to SF). Eventually a southern extension gets connected to the Palmdale line and you can do LA - SF in about 4 hours the most which is very good timing already.

Posted by: ed | May 18, 2011 at 02:08 PM





I'm so disturbed that so many people are so short-sighted in regards to infrastructure construction. This is a long term project with long term benefits. I can't imagine what our country would look like if the people that are so against HSR were around when construction began on the interstate highway system. We'd probably be driving on two lane dirt roads cross country. We have a responsibility to ourselves and our kids to renovate our infrastructure. Its shameful that the US has the worst infrastructure in the developed world. HSR will bring jobs, reduce pollution and make California a pioneer in what I do not doubt will be a nationwide network.

Posted by: Thomas | May 18, 2011 at 06:23 PM



Can we get throw this ridiculous requirement that a HSR system must make money out the window already?

There is no rail transportation system in the world that pays for itself. No subway, no train, none of them. Like highways, ports and airports, passenger rail is public infrastructure built with public money to promote mobility and economic growth. Transportation infrastructure in all it's forms are a fundamental necessity for economic success. There is no way to develop and grow an economy if that economy refuses to build the necessary transportation infrastructure.

Arguing that this train will lose money is beside the point. Every mode of transportation loses money. Most of the small cities and towns in America would not have electricity, water or a road connection if we required these to pay for themselves. We build these with tax money because without this necessary infrastructure, most of America would remain in the 19th Century and our economic development would have been halted a long time ago. If you think your utility rates pay the full cost of the infrastructure necessary to deliver water and electricity to your home, you are delusional. Every bit of that is subsidized by others, primarily large industrial users, simply because no home begins to use enough electricity or water to pay the full cost of the infrastructure necessary to deliver these to your home.

All of us are subsidized by tax money in varioius ways.

The alternative is poverty.

Posted by: Chris L | May 19, 2011 at 12:17 PM



Well said! I'm glad someone is finally standing up for HSR in California! I cannot wait until it is built and we can catch up with Western Europe and Asia. It is ridiculous how far behind we are.

Posted by: Michael | May 19, 2011 at 04:00 PM



Building the first segment from Bakersfield to LA would make infinitely more sense. Amtrak is forced to operate that segment with buses, so HSR would be filling a serious gap in the present network, which could generate revenue to supplement HSR's other funding. Detouring to Palmdale may broaden the ridership base but would lengthen the travel time too much. Come on; you want to be competitive with airlines. Dump the eco-disaster of building through pristine wilderness and use the existing Altamont corridor, A new Dumbarton Bridge is a must for Caltrain's Newark extension, and could also serve HSR, but politics and money want San Jose on the route; never mind that it makes no sense and adds costs and time. And don't force San Francisco to Sacramento travelers to go by way of Los Banos.

Posted by: Lionel Gambill | May 23, 2011 at 07:44 AM



People, California is flat out broke, broke, broke. Teachers are picketing due to bad budget and projected terminations; parks are closing to save maybe \$11 million per year; California is releasing 50,000 convicted felons to CA communities because we are BROKE and can't build new prisons; our bond rating by Moody's is WORST in the US, and we have \$80 billion already due for prior bond sales and Stanford estimates CA's true unfunded pension/healthcare liability for California workers at \$500 Billion dollars. What part of broke don't Democrats get? This train was never about, is not about, and will never be about emissions reduction, taking cars off the road, etc.

This project is about da Money, and how much can be funneled to the California Labor Federation, union trades councils, connected "consultant friends" of the HSR Board, and how much power and influence can be wielded and spread around like candy when idiots in California hand a bunch of un-elected politicians (i.e. CA's HSR Board) billions in cash. The project has already surpassed what was sold to the voters in 11/08, and should be ended for fraud: 1. \$33 billion total cost (now estimated at \$66 billion and rising); 2. CA's total obligation \$9 billion in bonds with no required CA operating subsidy once built (now CA on hook for all of it b/c federal gov't stopped investing in project and NO private investors put in ANY money, and operating subsidies now required for private investment; 3. ticket price sold to voters as \$50 one-way, now doubled to \$105, and not a shovel has hit the ground yet.

Consider this regarding the inevitable construction cost overruns: 1. SF Bay bridge originally estimated (or sold to voters) as only costing \$1.5 billion to build, has now spent already \$6.5 billion and project not completed yet; 2. Boston's big dig estimated at \$3.3 billion but ended up costing over \$24 billion.

If the CAHSR's "current estimate" of \$43 billion has cost overruns at the same percentage as these other Mega Projects (which always happens) then this project will likely cost around \$213 billion to complete. Think of how many teachers could be employed, water infrastructure fixed, prior bonds paid off, social services programs saved, and other needs fixed - versus a train from LA to SF that is slower and more inconvenient than a \$50 ticket on Southwest, United,

JetBlue, Virgin, American, Alaska, and the other 5 airlines with many, many daily flights from SFO to LAX. What a fraud and waste of taxpayer dollars. For \$6.5 billion in CA's Central Valley, you don't even get trains, electrification, rolling stock - just bare tracks, and ripped up farmlands that pre-existed this train by hundreds of years. Stop the madness now.

Posted by: Davide | May 24, 2011 at 06:25 AM



The portioned now planned does NOT connect Bakersfield with Fresno. We in Fresno are being told that it will begin near Wasco in northern Kern County and extend to Chowcilla north of Fresno. So Mr. Stern's statement is not true. He is equally wrong in asserting that a bullet train exists in the NE United States. If he is referring to Amtrak's Acela Express it averages 68 miles per hour from Boston to Washington, D.C. That's NOT my definition of High speed Rail. And we in Fresno are also being told by Fresno leaders that building through Fresno is problematic because the best alignment is the Union Pacific right-of-way that UP won't share (although I can envision a rail line built into the east embankment of highway 99 which hasn't been considered). BUT the real question is "who would use this bit of HSR it was built from Fresno to Bakersfield?" The only thing connecting these two cities now are minor league hockey teams. Almost all of the traffic on highway 99 between these two cities now is commercial trucking. HSR is suppose to be for passengers, not freight. Moreover, Amtrack currently connects these two cities at least three times a day. And it is laughable that anyone would ever need to get from one to the other in 30 minutes at 150 miles per hour, given that once you arrive you are at the mercy of local bus service which in Fresno is once every thirty minutes. The only reasonable conclusion to draw about HSR is that it is a joke that will never pay for itself and will only be used by people with fat wallets and government expense accounts who are afraid to fly. You might be able to convince me that it should exist from San Diego to LA where the terminals should be at Sports facilities and from Sacramento to Martinez where it would connect with BART. What this state really needs is better "normal" rail service, one that eliminates the "detour" by bus through Tehachipi and Cajon Pass. Building a real railroad over or by tunneling through the mountains along Interstate 5 or some other N-S route will fix whatever N-S connectivity problems this state has. I really don't think anyone involved in advocating for HSR has ever given meaningful thought to who might use it.

Posted by: David Davenport | June 16, 2011 at 12:07 PM

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